

Emotions in *Ben-Hur*: Dynamics of Emotion in
Texts, Reception Contexts, and Audience Responses
in the United States (1880-1931)

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I, Emily Clair Lord-Kambitsch Emily Lord-Kambitsch, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores emotions in the composition, circulation, popular cultural reception, and performance adaptations of Lew Wallace's novel *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880) from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century in the United States.

Initial mass consumption of the novel on an unprecedented scale gave way to a keen cultural desire to re-experience Wallace's narrative, a desire that persists to this day, with a third major motion picture adaptation anticipated for release in 2016. Perpetuation of this '*Ben-Hur* phenomenon' demonstrates the significance of *Ben-Hur* to the history of American receptions of ancient Rome, yet scholarship is only beginning to engage comprehensively with these texts and their functions within American popular culture.

The aim of the thesis is to understand this phenomenon of cultural engagement with *Ben-Hur* through the lens of emotions. The centrality of audience perspectives in this study lies both in the analysis of the textual invitations for audiences' emotional engagement, and in the survey of actual audience responses. The priority then is to evaluate subjective realms of audience interpretation within a complex interdependency of text, medium, reception context, and audience. This work thus speaks to current scholarly movements toward a greater concern for the audience's experience of classical reception.

Texts central to this project are Wallace's novel and the performance adaptations that are directly inspired by the novel, and occur in immediate chronological succession, namely Klaw and Erlanger's stageplay (1899-1920) and MGM's film (1925). Textual analysis engages approaches from research in the history of emotions, and incorporates methods of reading representations of emotions specific to the media through which *Ben-Hur* is manifested in these texts. Evaluation of emotions in audience responses employs documentary evidence from a significant store of archival material that reveals evolving patterns of audiences' engagement with the classical world in *Ben-Hur*.

To Felix, 'the husband of my youth'

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INDEX OF ABBREVIATIONS FOR FEATURED ARCHIVES

AMPAS	Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Beverly Hills, California, United States.
APD	American Periodicals Database. Accessed via Proquest.
BDCM	Bill Douglas Cinema Museum Special Collections, University of Exeter. Exeter, United Kingdom.
BFI	British Film Institute. London, United Kingdom.
CDPL	The Crawfordsville District Public Library Marian Morrison Local History Collection. Crawfordsville, Indiana, United States.
IHS	Indiana Historical Society. Indianapolis, Indiana, United States.
LL	Lilly Library, University of Indiana, Bloomington. Bloomington, Indiana, United States.
MHP	Media History Digital Library (http://mediahistoryproject.org).
NYPL	Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, United States.
SU	Music Library, Stanford University. Palo Alto, California, United States.
USC	Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California. Los Angeles, California, United States.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores issues of emotion in the composition, circulation, and popular cultural reception of Lew Wallace's novel *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880) from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century in the United States. This project both navigates representations of emotion in the novel and its performance adaptations occurring in immediate chronological succession to 1931, and evaluates dynamics of emotion in American cultural responses to these texts. This approach belongs to a realm of classical reception studies often mentioned in scholarship, but relatively uninvestigated, namely how issues of emotion play into the ways in which the ancient world is reconstructed, and the levels of engagement receivers of those reconstructions experience. Contributing to these major areas of investigation, and within the constraints of the available evidence, I aim to elucidate the evolving tension and interaction between *invitations* for audience emotional engagement discernible in the medium, the *imagined* audience responses anticipated by the authors of these literary and performance narratives of *Ben-Hur*, and the *actual* responses generated by audiences.

The relationship between emotions and reception of antiquity is a particularly important issue to consider within a study of *Ben-Hur*, because American cultural responses to the novel and its adaptations were characterised by an extraordinary number of personal testimonies that *Ben-Hur*, whether in print, on stage, or onscreen, changed the lives of those who consumed it. A significant number of these testimonies from individual spectators and readers survive in archives. It is imperative that these sources be read closely, in conjunction with the invitations for emotional engagement provided by the texts of *Ben-Hur*. Thereby it is possible to understand more meaningfully the remarkable scale of the success this narrative tradition had in the United States across generations, a success that carries at its heart personal, affective experiences of reading and viewing.

The 'Ben-Hur phenomenon'

The central questions for this study, the formulation of which this introduction will present, stem from key observations made in previous scholarship on the text(s) of *Ben-*

Hur and American responses to them. *Ben-Hur* in its various narrative forms is treated by scholars as a canonical text within the history of noteworthy American representations of ancient Rome. Concerns for the instrumental role audience reception has played in the process by which these texts became canonical are never far away. Margaret Malamud describes the ‘*Ben-Hur* phenomenon’, the mass consumption of Wallace’s novel on an unprecedented scale, as an important manifestation of a nineteenth-century American cultural anxiety about the simultaneous self-identification with Roman Imperial decadence, and/or with Christian moral determination and asceticism.¹ Howard Miller (forthcoming) employs audience testimonies to explore the influence of Klaw and Erlanger’s drama *Ben-Hur* (1899–1920) on the introduction of many evangelical Christian communities in the United States to the theatre. Michael Williams and Ruth Scodel have recently drawn attention to MGM’s 1925 film production in terms of its capacity to transform the novel’s original invitations for audiences’ engagement with characters in *Ben-Hur*. Their respective commentaries on the film’s representations of masculinity and Second Temple Judaism embodied in the character of protagonist Judah Ben-Hur (played in this film by actor Ramon Novarro) offer an interesting perspective on the movement toward a greater scholarly concern with spectatorship.² Joanna Paul indicates the almost universally acknowledged categorisation of the 1959 *Ben-Hur* within the ‘epic’ film genre. She interrogates the foundation of this categorisation by investigating the relationship between the visually spectacular and the epic, manifested in *Ben-Hur* since its initial literary incarnation, and carried over from a tradition going back to Greek and Roman literary models from antiquity.³ For Paul, a significant factor that plays into an ancient world film’s status as an epic film is the socio-cultural impact attributed to it by the audience in the context of its reception.⁴

Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ (1880) created a cultural sensation, unprecedented in the United States, which manifested itself through audiences’ active and sustained engagement with the text. Unpublished letters from readers to Lew Wallace testify to collective use of the novel for spiritual instruction in church contexts, on the basis of Christianity as it was represented in Wallace’s novel in conjunction with the New Testament. Wallace gradually gained a tripartite public persona as a scholar educating

¹ Malamud (2009) 133–46.

² Williams (2012: 113–144); Scodel (2013).

³ Paul (2013) 213–50. Paul does not follow Solomon’s venture into the issue of *Ben-Hur* as a ‘biblical epic’, as it is commonly treated in other scholarship (Elley, 2013; Babington and Evans, 1993; Santas, 2008: 73–86—although in Santas the term ‘religious epic’ is used).

⁴ Paul (2013) 217–18.

Americans about the ancient Near East, a convert to Christianity as a result of composing *Ben-Hur*, and a warrior for American political and ideological unity (as a former Union general in the American Civil War). After his death, Wallace as a literary ‘immortal’ was compared to Homer and Vergil for his so-called divinely inspired text that came to be considered as an American origin narrative.⁵ Archival material reveals the significant extent to which Wallace worked to reinforce this public image for the rest of his life. He performed an extensive series of lecture tours, and corresponded with readers from a range of socio-economic, religious, and regional backgrounds.

From a cultural studies perspective, the response to Wallace’s novel may be characterised as an incidence of widespread fandom. The novel’s enthusiastic receivers created communities based upon a shared interpretation of the text, read and re-read the text literally religiously, developed derivative art forms and activities on the basis of the text (a kind of quasi-fan fiction), bought consumer goods and entertainments inspired by the novel, and exhibited aspects of reverence for the work and its author. In scholarship these behaviours are commonly associated with the phenomenon of fandom.⁶ Before the days of social media, the fandom surrounding *Ben-Hur* (1880) sustained the novel’s presence in the American cultural consciousness, and provided a primed audience for *Ben-Hur*’s adaptation into performance media. Like the ongoing engagement of fans with the literary archetypes and cinematic adaptations of the *Harry Potter* series or the *Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, fans’ engagement with *Ben-Hur* in its various narrative forms persisted and transformed the pattern of responses to the original text and its author in conversation with the later adaptations and their respective ‘authors’ in the decades following the novel’s publication.

Despite its 1880 publication date, Wallace’s novel was the second best-selling book after the Bible, and the number one best-selling work of fiction in the United States of the nineteenth century. Within the first twenty years following its initial publication, the novel was translated into multiple languages (including a Vatican-sponsored Italian edition), and was adapted into a melodrama, which ran for twenty-one years, touring in the United States, Britain, and Australia.⁷ The nascent MGM studios produced a feature film adaptation in 1925, the most expensive film made to date. MGM followed up the resounding success of this film with a remake in 1959, which won an unprecedented eleven Academy Awards, including Best Picture, and earned \$75

⁵ ‘Lew Wallace’ (4 May 1905). *Herald of Gospel Liberty* 98 (18), APD.

⁶ For a seminal work that explores through a series of case studies the operation of the characteristics of fan cultures, see Jenkins (2013). For a discussion of theoretical approaches to studies in fan cultures see Hills (2002).

⁷ Thiesen (1984) 35-7.

million in box office revenue.⁸ Joanna Paul posits the lasting influence of Wallace's novel on the American consciousness as a reason for the significant audience response to MGM's 1959 film, to date the most widely known narrative form of *Ben-Hur* in popular culture: 'High production values and lavish visuals were characteristic of the Hollywood epic by the late 1950s, and were not the novelty they would have been to a 1920s audience, so the narrative of Wallace's original novel had to have been an important draw'.⁹ The American cultural desire to recreate and re-experience the central narrative of *Ben-Hur* remains alive today; we currently await the arrival of a *third* major motion picture adaptation by MGM and Paramount in 2016. This new cinematic interpretation promises to return to 'Lew Wallace's epic novel focusing on the nature of faith'.¹⁰

The survival of Wallace's text that permeates the adaptations of *Ben-Hur* gives rise to the central questions of this project: How did the novel *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880) become a cultural phenomenon? Why did American readers relate so personally and so profoundly to the text that they would generate original creative productions inspired by *Ben-Hur*, or convert to Christianity in accordance with the spiritual journey of the novel's fictional protagonist? Why does *Ben-Hur* continue to re-emerge as a defining text for American self-identification? How have American conceptions of the United States as simultaneously a new Rome and a new Jerusalem evolved, and how have the various adaptations of *Ben-Hur* represented and facilitated these changing interpretations? Given the clear evidence of the unique and lasting cultural impact of the narrative tradition of *Ben-Hur*, these questions deserve the attention of scholarship in classical reception studies. These are of course large questions whose evaluation may invite a number of methodological approaches.¹¹ The records of readers' responses to the novel indicate a dynamic, ongoing, yet highly complex relationship between text, author, and response that demands a comprehensive approach. This approach necessitates a careful analysis of the text in conversation with the responses to it, within the social and historical context of its emergence.

⁸ Solomon (2013a) 17.

⁹ Paul (2013) 228. Yet Mayer (forthcoming) rightly indicates that there are collectively acknowledged 'essentials' (most of them action sequences) of Wallace's novel which repeatedly dominate performance adaptations. This then results in the omission of episodes (and even characters) from Wallace that could otherwise potentially convey messages of striking relevance and depth to audiences of these later adaptations.

¹⁰ Press release from MGM Studios and Paramount Pictures. Accessed via *USA Today*, 'Ben-Hur remake set for 2016 release' (25 April 2014). <http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2014/04/25/paramount-mgm-to-remake-historical-epic-ben-hur/8157223/> (Accessed 1 December 2015).

¹¹ For instance, Solomon's forthcoming survey of the commodification of *Ben-Hur*, beginning with the reception of the novel, aims to deal with broadly parallel realms of inquiry (Solomon, 2014).

A revival of scholarly interest in *Ben-Hur* narratives, from the novel to the 1959 MGM film, is just emerging, as a forthcoming collection of essays, and a monograph from Jon Solomon (also forthcoming) demonstrate.¹² However, with the exception of Jon Solomon's recent analysis of the text in order to recover the classical sources that inspired its generation,¹³ there is as yet no published scholarship with a sustained interest in *Ben-Hur* (1880), nor is there significant textual analysis above the level of detailed summary. This may seem surprising, given the novel's profound impact on American cultural attitudes as cited above. It is acknowledged that *Ben-Hur* (1880) gained and sustained such a significant following due to its placement of the Life of Christ narrative (evoking Jesus-centric American evangelical Protestantism) in conversation with the vivid aesthetic reconstructions of ancient Rome with which the United States indulged a reluctant self-identification.¹⁴ Yet, when contemporary testimonies describe for instance *Ben-Hur*'s appearance alongside the Bible in the evangelical Sunday school, an interest in textual invitations for audience engagement should be a high priority if we seek to understand the '*Ben-Hur* phenomenon'.

From which methodological approach should the text(s) of *Ben-Hur* be read in order to investigate meaningfully their capacity to influence the spiritual, social, and educational experiences of their audiences? Contemporary audience responses to the novel, particularly those having to do with the creation of original communities and derivative narratives inspired by *Ben-Hur*, often demonstrate self-reported experiences of emotional engagement with the text. It is the observation of this ubiquitous factor in audience responses to *Ben-Hur* in print, at the theatre, and at the cinema that leads to questions concerning strategies of emotional engagement these texts provide. Evaluating emotions in audience responses to these narratives allows for an in-depth investigation into the perspectives of the individual readers, and reading communities, who participated first-hand in building *Ben-Hur* into an American cultural phenomenon. Moreover, a study of emotions in the synthesis of text, reception, and context has the potential to yield significant insight into *Ben-Hur*'s evocation of salient issues of social fragmentation in the post-Civil War United States: religious pluralism and the growth of evangelical Protestantism during the Great Awakening, slavery and the Reconstruction, emerging middle-class consumerism, and revised conceptions of gender relations in domestic and public arenas. Responses generated by individual audience members,

¹² Although these materials are not yet published, I have been granted access to forthcoming chapters by David Mayer and Howard Miller to versions of their chapters in the collection.

¹³ Solomon (2015).

¹⁴ Malamud (2009) 122-49.

whether professional critics or ‘ordinary’ receivers of *Ben-Hur*,¹⁵ provide an extraordinary glimpse of receivers’ personal experiences of navigating these social and political issues through exposure to *Ben-Hur* in distinct reception contexts. A methodological aim to identify the material in the text that precipitates emotional engagement with the text on the part of the reader then allows for a holistic approach to the question of the means by which *Ben-Hur* experienced such a significant reception.

The role of audiences

The centrality of audience perspectives within this project, both in its analysis of the text for solicitations of audiences’ emotional engagement and in its survey of audience responses, situates this study within a scholarly movement toward a greater concern for the audience, or ‘receiver’ experience of classical reception. Catharine Edwards has drawn attention to the perspective of the receiver in order to refine the accuracy of scholarly conceptions of nineteenth-century receptions of Rome. Edwards indicates in *Roman Presences* that while at first glance the nineteenth century appears to have been characterised by European philhellenism, most people in Britain and on the continent had more of an exposure to Roman ruins, and to public buildings constructed to resemble Roman architecture, than they did to the Greek texts being circulated among the sociopolitical elite and intelligentsia.¹⁶ The collection *Pompeii and the Public Imagination*, edited by Shelley Hales and Joanna Paul, has explored Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) and its visual and performance art adaptations in Britain and in the United States with the audience experience in mind.¹⁷

As Lorna Hardwick and Stephen Harrison’s collection, *Classics in the Modern World: A Democratic Turn?*, demonstrates, recent scholarship interrogates questions of audience identity and agency/passivity in the act of reception. The ‘democratisation’ of classical reception, although a problematic concept for reasons elucidated by Lorna Hardwick and Katherine Harloe within that volume,¹⁸ aims generally to expand the scholarly awareness of perspectives delivered by audiences from a multiplicity of social, ethnic, educational, and gender backgrounds. These audience perspectives are

¹⁵ I use ‘ordinary’ in the same sense as Hardwick (2013: 17) mentions it to qualify audiences outside of critical and academic circles ‘who may or may not have specific previous knowledge or experience of classical material’.

¹⁶ Edwards (1999) 5.

¹⁷ Hales and Paul (eds.)(2011), especially chapters by Harrison (75-89), Malamud (199-214), and Sedyl (215-31).

¹⁸ Hardwick (2013); Harloe (2013). I am inclined to agree with Hardwick’s (2013: 18) estimation that the widening of scholarly attention to encompass non-traditional (or non-elite) forms of creating and responding to products of classical reception constitutes more of a movement toward pluralism and diversity than toward democracy.

being perceived as having significant influence in their ability to determine the meaning of the text of classical reception. Simon Goldhill calls attention to the audience's creative role in constructing meaning at what he calls the 'scene of reception', particularly in examples of performance, where 'meaning is conceived as a public event'.¹⁹ Maria Wyke has explored the means by which the audience of the classical reception product, particularly in the case of Rome on film, changes the public understanding of antiquity, as receivers' interpretations of the texts and material culture from antiquity (the 'authentic' past) and the fictionalised past onscreen continually inform each other in a backward and forward movement of ideas, images, and representations of antiquity that also interact with the context of reception.²⁰

With respect to the audience experience, the priority of my project is to understand the subjective, affective realms of audience interpretation. What this work will demonstrate is a complex interdependency of text, medium, reception context, and audience. Despite its attempt to be 'nondiscriminatory' in the personal backgrounds of individuals included in the pool of audiences demonstrating emotional engagement with the text, this study has encountered certain limitations that to some extent problematise the notion of a methodology that seeks a democratic approach to audience studies in classical reception. Not all products of classical reception—even different adaptations of the same narrative, as we see in the case of *Ben-Hur*—are created equal in their capacity to reach a broad array of audiences. Each product of classical reception has a unique history of production, circulation and response, very much attuned to the reception context, a history which can be retold to greater or lesser extent depending on the documentation available.²¹ The media within which classical receptions are communicated vary greatly, encompassing for example literature, theatre, cinema, painting, architecture, computer games, and fashion. The contexts in which they are received vary from political, educational, therapeutic,²² entertainment, liturgical, and academic. The identities of audiences are often determined by the established socio-cultural function and/or level of public accessibility of the medium or the reception context at the time of audiences' encounter with the text. In the context of this study, many testimonies of emotional engagement are self-selected (people who went out of their way to write to Wallace, for instance) by those who had the interest and the means

¹⁹ Goldhill (2011) 13-14.

²⁰ Wyke (1997).

²¹ Wrigley (2013: 360) advocates a similar approach that explores archival evidence of contemporary audience engagement.

²² For instance, the *Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives* staged readings from Greek tragedy and epic for combat veterans and their families, described in Meineck (2012).

to share their personal impressions. Within these considerations, it is important to note, particularly when the reception context occurs before the rise of the internet and social media, which audience impressions survive and which do not.

For instance, the noteworthy absence of perspectives offered by African Americans lingers throughout the archival evidence of reader responses to the novel, stageplay, and silent film versions of *Ben-Hur* addressed in this study. The crucial image of the slave galley created by Wallace, a former Union General in the Civil War, carries clear associations with the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and the continuation of African slavery in the United States that resulted in domestic conflict and lingering ideological fragmentation. The galley as the site of protagonist Judah Ben-Hur's freedom and adoption into aristocratic Roman society can arguably be read, in part, as a symbol of the reintegration of former slaves into the United States during the Reconstruction Period. Yet, the audience responses to the novel communicate no explicit references to this interpretation of the galley in *Ben-Hur*. Likewise, audience testimonies and promotional material for the dramatic and cinematic adaptations of *Ben-Hur* at the beginning of the twentieth century demonstrate no specific efforts to promote these texts to African American audiences or to represent the responses of African American receivers to these texts. Some receiving communities even made efforts to exclude prospective African American receivers. The Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur, founded with Wallace's permission as a fraternal organisation and insurance business in 1894, did not accept black members until 1970, despite its origin in the North, in Wallace's home state of Indiana.²³ Although the success of the novel and its adaptations in the first quarter of the twentieth century was widespread, we must acknowledge the *whiteness* of its success, to which the evidence points. Wallace's novel became memorialised for its Christian origin narrative that provided ideological healing for the United States following the Civil War. Yet, with many freedmen and freedwomen still suffering discrimination, social segregation, crime, and other forms of oppression in the post-war South,²⁴ the predominant whiteness of *Ben-Hur*'s message of political and social integration through Christian moral uplift becomes all the more apparent.

The current theoretical approach to audience studies within classical reception scholarship that is most closely aligned with that demonstrated in my project is probably Amanda Wrigley's conception of looking at the 'cultural event' of classical

²³ Iliff (1994) 16.

²⁴ Hartman (1997) 115-63.

reception through a multi-faceted lens, or ‘in the round’.²⁵ Wrigley is concerned with maintaining an openness to a variety of contemporary sources anticipating and/or reporting audience engagement that constitute the ‘cultural event’ of reception. In this study, I maintain a similar interest in representing the voices of both author(s) and audiences, yet I prioritise an overarching concern for emotion that determines the treatment of these perspectives with respect to one another and to the text. The thematic focus on emotion allows the documentation of invited, imagined, and actual audience impressions surrounding the ‘cultural events’ of *Ben-Hur*’s reception (including adaptations) to be applied to the higher question of which social, cultural, and emotional mechanisms allowed the narrative of *Ben-Hur* to remain impactful for American culture throughout subsequent decades.

Historical narration and emotions

A survey of audience impressions is only somewhat beneficial without an understanding of the textual content to which the audience members are responding. This requires an analysis of the salient passages of the text, defined as such by their recurrence, or citations of their primary importance, in reports of audiences’ emotional engagement with the text. This process can lead to an investigation of the methods through which the text *invites* the audience to respond emotionally, and an evaluation of the success of those invitations. As I will demonstrate throughout this thesis, the narrative frameworks within the literary, theatrical, and cinematic texts of *Ben-Hur* often contain concrete patterns of invitation for audience emotional response—for instance, modeling the response through embedded spectators within the narrative, or inserting the author’s direction to the reader/viewer to experience the narrative with a certain predominant emotion. By highlighting these narrative strategies, this study aims to interrogate the representation of emotion systems in the interaction between text and receiver.

Scholars of historical fiction in the tradition of Sir Walter Scott (a known model for Wallace), and scholars of historical film draw attention to the ‘emotionalised’ version of history that is shaped by the popular appeal of these narrative forms.²⁶ Historical fiction, whether literary or cinematic, invites readers and spectators to experience historical circumstances subjectively through the point of view of an individual protagonist, who is at the effect of the social, political, and ideological

²⁵ Wrigley (2013) 361.

²⁶ For the historical novel, see Lukács (1962) and Orel (1995). For the historical film, see Rosenstone (2012).

structures of the place and time he or she inhabits. Studies in film spectatorship emphasise the instrumental role of emotions in audiences' reading of films, both at the cinema and via extra-cinematic engagements with the film text (for instance, what Janet Staiger calls 'post-movie talk').²⁷ Despite this foundational secondary literature, there currently exists no significant investigation into the operation of emotions within the reception of fictional representations of the classical world, although scholars do acknowledge the role of emotions in the capacity for historical fiction narratives, such as *The Last Days of Pompeii* (originating with Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1834 novel) and *Ben-Hur*, to maintain relevance and continually garner the enthusiasm of audiences throughout various media adaptations. For instance, in the conclusion to his study on patterns of audience engagement with Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), Stephen Harrison remarks, 'While some may privilege the emotional impact of the novel, this discussion has shown that there are also important intellectual reference points which would speak particularly to an elite audience'.²⁸

Yet clearly emotions were a crucial strategy Bulwer-Lytton claimed to have employed in his novel in order to invite his readers to perceive the inhabitants of Pompeii as worthy of empathy. Moreover, Bulwer-Lytton instructed his reader to experience Pompeii through the fictionalised characters' perceptions of it, and through these characters' emotions, which were presented as universal. Hales and Paul, in the introduction to *Pompeii and the Public Imagination*, draw attention to this:

The power of [Bulwer-Lytton's] communion with the Pompeians lay in his investment of them with authentic feelings, and his connection of those emotions to those felt by his readers: in claiming that 'the affections are immortal!' Bulwer-Lytton leads the charge of those who seek to find in Pompeii evidence of connection and continuity between the ancient and modern world.²⁹

As Harrison mentions, Bulwer-Lytton is writing for an elite audience, for in his preface the author identifies himself with his reader as sharing a formal education in 'the classical age'. Yet Bulwer-Lytton presents his audience's prior intellectual familiarity with the classical world as a challenge to his own ability to create characters with whom such readers can personally identify:

But with the classical age we have no household or familiar associations. The creed of that departed religion, the customs of that past civilization, present little that is sacred or attractive to our northern imagination; they are rendered yet more trite to us by the scholastic pedantries which first acquainted us with their nature, and we are linked

²⁷ Staiger (2000); Tan (1996); Smith (1995).

²⁸ Harrison (2011) 89.

²⁹ Hales and Paul (2011) 9.

with the recollection of studies, which were imposed as a labour, and not cultivated as a delight.³⁰

Yet further on in his preface the author underscores his primary responsibility, ‘in treating of an unfamiliar and distant period’, of ensuring that ‘the characters introduced “live and move” before the eye of the reader’.³¹ He returns to this idea when he expresses the nature of the legacy he intends his novel to develop: ‘Enough, if this book...should be found a portrait...not altogether an unfaithful likeness of the features and the costume of the age which I have attempted to paint:—may it be (what is far more important) a just representation of the human passions and the human heart, whose elements in all ages are the same!’³²

Bulwer-Lytton’s preface indicates a conflict between the notion of historicised emotions and the claim to a universality of emotional experience, a tension which the medium of fiction is continually striving to reconcile. Although Lew Wallace did not write a preface for *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880), the author emulates Bulwer-Lytton’s systematic portrayal of the ancient world and its inhabitants in noteworthy ways I will explore in Chapter 1 of this thesis. Wallace also engages meaningfully with the question of an author’s role in fabricating ‘ancient’ emotions, whether historicised or universal—in the case of the novel *Ben-Hur*, the same character can manifest both sets of emotions, based on the degree to which Wallace aims to alienate the reader from or engage the reader with the psychological experience of the character at various points in the narrative.

Inherent in this tension is also the reader’s perception of his or her own emotions as on the one hand universal and on the other constructed by the historical circumstances in which he or she lives. Bulwer-Lytton’s description of his readers’ pre-conditioned sentiments toward the classical world we saw above adds a complicated element of cultural sensibility, in this case determined by nationality, class, and (rather more implicitly) gender, which the reader brings to the work, and to which the author must tailor his treatment of the subject matter. Within Bulwer-Lytton’s positioning of himself as simultaneously the learned painter of a reliable representation of Pompeii in 79 CE and the self-proclaimed ‘Poet’ who rejuvenates the inhabitants of this historical setting with recognisable social and emotional traits, there is an invitation for the reader

³⁰ Bulwer-Lytton (1834) vii. Goldhill (2011: 188) comments on the contrast Bulwer-Lytton draws with respect to ostensible emotional affinity between the inhabitants of the classical world and the inhabitants of the ‘men of the feudal time [with whom] we have a natural sympathy and bond of alliance’ (Bulwer-Lytton, 1834: vi).

³¹ Ibid, xi.

³² Ibid, xvi.

to engage with the *author* as well as the text. The image of the author as the conduit for the Victorian reader's sympathy with the classical world thus plays an instrumental role in the textual invitations for readers' emotional engagement.³³

Theories of emotion

Theoretical approaches to emotions for the purposes of this study have developed from an engagement with methodologies related to the concept of a history of emotions. This has much to do with negotiating the tension between ideas of universal and historicised emotions as seen in the discussion of Bulwer-Lytton's preface to *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834). Within classics and ancient history, fairly recent efforts to delineate the social function of emotions in antiquity have created an influential framework for my own methodology in the study of the ways in which emotions function in texts of the *reception* of antiquity. Robert Kaster's *Emotions, Restraint and Community in Ancient Rome* (2005), Martha Nussbaum's *Therapy of Desire* (2009), and Angelos Chaniotis' edited collections on *Unveiling Emotions* (2012; 2013, co-edited by Pierre Ducrey) all address ancient Greek and Roman conceptions of specific emotions and socially constructed patterns of emotional behaviour. These models use a variety of media (literature, art, epigraphy, papyri) to investigate attitudes toward specific emotions, and cultural interpretations of the ways in which emotions operate for individuals in affect and cognition, and are communicated and managed physiologically and circumstantially in the community.

In my exploration of the interaction between reconstructions of emotions in fictionalised antiquity and the emotional experiences of their receivers, I have adopted a similar mixed-media approach. This approach seeks to recover the ways in which Lew Wallace, and the authors of the theatrical and cinematic adaptations of *Ben-Hur* featured in this study, constructed emotions and their behavioural contexts for the inhabitants of the fictionalised version of ancient Judaea. Also, the appearance of emotions in the responses to these reconstructions produced in the context of reception (i.e. newspapers, personal letters, commercial products) provides insight into audiences' interpretation of the foreignness, familiarity, and/or historical accuracy of these representations of 'ancient' emotional behaviours. As a diachronic study, this thesis will maintain a concern for the ways in which 'ancient' emotions and their interpretation

³³ Goldhill (2013) indicates the relationship between the cultural consumption of Bulwer-Lytton's novel and the circulating public perceptions of the author's persona that amounted to a cult following of sorts. See Chapter 2, Section 5 of this thesis for reader responses to *Ben-Hur* (1880) which report lasting affective relationships with the novel as at least in part a manifestation of readers' perceived personal affiliation with Wallace.

transform with the adaptation of the text and the concerns of audiences throughout a fifty-year period.

By virtue of its application of methodological elements from the ‘history of emotions’ perspective, this project operates from what John Corrigan calls a standpoint of ‘cultural relativism’³⁴ for understanding reconstructions of ‘ancient’ emotions in *Ben-Hur*, and the ways in which receivers of those reconstructions negotiated and communicated their emotional relationship to the version of antiquity they encountered. Within this ‘cultural relativism’ paradigm, the primary concern for emotions is their cultural conceptualisation and operation in a social context—instead of universal experience, the difference from society to society in the interpretation of emotional experience and social coding for emotional behaviour is emphasised. In keeping with the methodological orientation of this thesis, the definition of emotion from psychology, as set out by Kleinginna and Kleinginna, will be accepted. This definition simultaneously affirms the affective and physiological elements of emotional experience, but invites the connection between emotion, cognition, and resultant action:

Emotion is a complex set of interactions among subjective and objective factors, mediated by neural/hormonal systems, which can (a) give rise to affective experiences such as feelings of arousal, pleasure/displeasure; (b) generate cognitive processes... (c) activate widespread physiological adjustments to the arousing conditions; and (d) lead to behavior that is often, but not always, expressive, goal-directed, and adaptive.³⁵

The progression from emotional sensation to cognitive deliberation and outward expression of emotion entails a consideration for socio-cultural models for communicating emotion, models within which the individual experiencing the emotion is functioning. In this definition, emotions have an essential cognitive dimension that helps humans negotiate their relationships with the environment and with others. The cognitive dimension allows for emotions to be analysed not only through physiological evidence, but through evidence related to cultural and social interaction (including literature, art, personal correspondence, speeches, theatre, etc). This project will employ primarily the latter category of evidence to investigate the ways in which emotion

³⁴ Corrigan (2004: 7-12) indicates that within the study of emotions there is a dichotomy between cultural relativists and those in cognitive science, psychology, and other fields, who search for evidence of the universality of emotional experience. Ekman’s (1992) study indicating that the capacity to recognise human emotions in facial expressions is universal among humans constitutes an example of the latter. My approach on the ‘cultural relativism’ side does not seek to analyse the *actual* emotional experiences of *Ben-Hur*’s audiences, but to explore the ways in which emotions appear in the discourse of the experience of reception. At the same time my approach does not exclude what appears to be an emerging conception (in theories of emotion) of synthesis between universal physiological experience and the cultural constructs related to the channels for the expression of that experience.

³⁵ Kleinginna and Kleinginna (1981: 355) propose this model as one means of synthesizing the cognitive and affective, and objective and subjective aspects of emotional experience and outward expression that at the time of their article’s publication were traditionally treated as distinct in differentiated definitions of emotion.

operates in the reconstruction of first-century Judaea in *Ben-Hur* and in responses to this reconstruction.

Within this conceptual orientation, two important methodological models influence my approach to the study of the reconstruction of ancient emotions (and invitations for audiences' emotional engagement) in *Ben-Hur*, and the emergence of emotions in response (whether or not these responses are in direct conversation with the invitations for emotional engagement). Historians Peter and Carol Stearns propose an approach within the history of emotions that features the concept of 'emotionology', defined as:

The attitudes or standards that a society, or a definable group within a society, maintains toward basic emotions and their appropriate expression; ways that institutions reflect and encourage these attitudes in human conduct, e.g., courtship practices as expressing the valuation of affect in marriage, or personnel workshops as reflecting the valuation of anger in job relationships.³⁶

The Stearns and Stearns model of emotionology will be applied exclusively to discussion of the *representation* of emotions in the text(s) of *Ben-Hur*, particularly as they are experienced and communicated by characters who frequently play out the emotionology determined by their social and historical circumstances (especially in the case of the novel). The idea of an 'emotionology' is central to the methods Wallace and other nineteenth-century historical novelists used to negotiate the issue of emotional accessibility and emotional alienation they invited readers to experience with the inhabitants of the ancient worlds they reconstructed (as is apparent in Bulwer-Lytton's preface). By explaining that a character's behaviour is alien to the sensibilities of a nineteenth-century reader, due to the fact that the behaviour is coded according to an ancient, foreign emotionology, the historical novelist attempts to problematise the reader's sympathy with that character, by imposing a cultural distance with respect to norms of emotional expression. The creation of psychosocial distance between text and receiver, and the author's self-assigned responsibility in mediating this issue in the fabrication of ancient emotionologies, will play a crucial role in my analysis of emotions in the texts of *Ben-Hur*. Additionally, this focus for analysis suggests an instrumental role for emotion in the narrative paradox observed by Simon Goldhill: 'There is a telling lack in Victorian historical fiction of any consistent attempt to maintain the frame of fiction. Rather, constant attention is drawn to the present time (and place) of the reader and writer, and thus to the negotiated and constructed distance between present and past'.³⁷ The author of the historical novel, in the attempt to invite a

³⁶ Stearns and Stearns (1985) 813.

³⁷ Goldhill (2011) 184.

balance between sympathy and curiosity for the foreign exoticism of historical authenticity, thus constructs a narrative that selectively employs emotionological phenomena to portray inhabitants of antiquity who are simultaneously ‘others’ and ‘ourselves’. Subtle elements of this paradigm appear to some extent in melodrama and in film as well.

The permeable boundary between the author’s representation of ‘ancient’ emotions as distant and alien, or intimately relatable, is highly predicated on the context of reception. Contemporary conflicts in American conceptions of self-identification with Rome and with early Christianity³⁸ are highly relevant to consider in the discussion of the author’s rendering of ancient emotions and emotionologies. Thereby we can understand the author’s invitations for recipients of his work to perceive *his* ancient world as engaging with their own concept of antiquity and its interaction with the constellation of certain cultural attitudes, ideological phenomena, and circulation of ideas in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. In turn, this consideration allows us to evaluate the interaction between the text of *Ben-Hur* and these socio-cultural messages operating in the background that receivers bring to the process of interpreting the text and developing emotional responses to it.

Another model from scholarship in the history of emotions will inform my discussion of the patterns of emotion in audience *responses* to the written and performed texts of *Ben-Hur*. This model is Barbara Rosenwein’s idea of the ‘emotional community’:

Emotional communities are largely the same as social communities—families, neighborhoods, syndicates, academic institutions, monasteries, factories, platoons, princely courts. But the researcher looking at them seeks above all to uncover systems of feeling, to establish what these communities (and the individuals within them) define and assess as valuable or harmful to them (for it is about such things that people express emotions); the emotions that they value, devalue, or ignore; the nature of the affective bonds between people that they recognize; and the modes of emotional expression that they expect, encourage, tolerate, and deplore.³⁹

Rosenwein’s conception of ‘emotional community’ is well-suited to describe phenomena of audience emotional response to the texts of *Ben-Hur*. A large percentage of materials documenting audience responses to Wallace’s novel consists of letters to the author from readers. In many of these sources the individual reader expresses either a sense of affiliation with a community of readership that is defined as experiencing a collective emotional relationship to the text, or a longing to join such a community. Since the Life of Christ narrative is so

³⁸ This is spelled out thoroughly in Malamud (2009: 122-185).

³⁹ Rosenwein (2010) 11.

intimately connected with the historical narrative in *Ben-Hur*, often these emotional communities of readership functioned also as Christian communities. As *Ben-Hur* is adapted for performance and enters media designed for a collective audience, emotional communities of reception, and the ways in which audiences express their responses to the narrative, change. For instance, pre-existing fan networks associated with film stars exhibit primary interest in the stars involved in MGM's *Ben-Hur* (1925) as part of a greater phenomenon of collectively acknowledged desire to commune with certain star personas.⁴⁰

Rosenwein's concept of an emotional community will be used to describe patterns of audience *responses* to the text, because this model can observe the agency of audiences in their formation of receiving communities on the basis of a shared interpretation and emotional experience of the text. Participation in such an emotional community of interpretation brings to light for receivers *Ben-Hur*'s ability to resonate with and challenge the complexities of the receivers' own socio-historical circumstances. The nuances and versatility of the connection between emotion and community emphasised in both of these models will be continuously interrogated from the textual, authorial, and audience perspectives throughout this thesis.

Media and emotions

Within these more general approaches to emotions, specific theories of emotional engagement associated with the media (novel, melodrama, and film) through which the *Ben-Hur* text is communicated, and received, will be incorporated into my analysis of the text(s). In my reading of the dynamics of emotion and invitations for reader engagement offered by the novel, a great amount of interest in contemporary literary models, particularly within the genres of historical fiction in the style of Sir Walter Scott and American biblical fiction, will be considered for their potential influence on Wallace's narrative strategies. Jon Solomon has recently produced a convincing survey of classical sources that may have influenced the plot structure and stylistic features of *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880).⁴¹ My focus on *contemporary* models instead

⁴⁰ For background on the collective emotional experience of fan networks, see Dyer (1998). For foundational literature on reader/audience experiences of fan magazines and star personas in the 1920s, see Studlar (1996).

⁴¹ Not many of Wallace's research notes survive, and in his notes on the historical detail for the rendering of the city of Antioch (Wallace MSS. II, LL) the author for the most part cites contemporary encyclopedias rather than ancient sources. Also, Wallace does not mention explicitly his engagement with ancient sources during the writing process, so the classical sources in Solomon (2015) must be considered as convincing, yet still 'potential' influences. The modern sources must also be seen as 'potential'.

follows in the vein of Margaret Malamud,⁴² and moreover reflects this project's concern for the receiver, by speaking to the connections immediate receivers of the novel made between *Ben-Hur* and precedents in contemporary fiction rather than ancient literary models, with the notable exception of the New Testament.

Detailed analysis of emotions and audience engagement strategies in the Klaw and Erlanger stageplay of *Ben-Hur* (1899-1920) requires a different methodological approach. Influential studies in expressive techniques in melodrama,⁴³ and in spectacular 'toga drama' (the established subgenre within which *Ben-Hur* was produced)⁴⁴ emphasise the meeting of verbal and non-verbal modes of communication to play out emotions on stage, in terms of character development and atmospheric setting. Melodrama employs a range of tools of multi-sensory stimulation to invite audiences to experience the narrative of *Ben-Hur* through varied levels of emotional distance and immediacy. The issue of the reception context of melodrama—a context that determines the text be received collectively, in a theatre, with the social and cultural connotations of the theatre at the turn of the century—will be considered in conversation with the playscript, and with Wallace's novel.

Two cinematic texts of *Ben-Hur* are addressed in this thesis: Kalem Studios' early narrative, the one-reel *Ben-Hur* (1907), produced without permission from the author's estate, and MGM Studios' narrative feature film *Ben-Hur* (1925). While these texts belong to the same medium, in that they are produced on film for exhibition in a collective viewing context, in terms of performance style they are quite distinct from one another. The staging, the gestures of the actors, and the distant, static point of view of the spectator (as represented by the camera work) in *Ben-Hur* (1907) is to a great extent inspired by performance conventions in spectacular melodrama.⁴⁵ This film text was circulated in the United States at the same time as the Klaw and Erlanger melodrama was touring, and provides key insight into a significant alternative means by which the narrative of *Ben-Hur* was being communicated and experienced by audiences in the venue of the nickelodeon.

The 1925 *Ben-Hur* by contrast employs editing techniques (including intertitles with dialogue), colour, dynamic camerawork, varied and elaborate mise-en-scène and a standard musical score to craft atmospheres and characters along a spectrum of emotional immediacy and 'otherness', providing a visual balance between the

⁴² Malamud (2009) 134-9.

⁴³ Brooks (1995).

⁴⁴ Mayer (1994); Barrow (2010); Richards (2009).

⁴⁵ See Mayer (2009) for background on early narrative filmmakers' development of cinematic performance style from theatre.

familiarity and historicity Wallace himself worked to maintain. The use of close-ups, dialogue, costume, lighting, and framing for purposes of characterisation enhances the character-oriented expression of emotions in this film.⁴⁶ The production of this film at the height of the star system in the silent era necessitates the additional concern for the casting, and potential readings of the players in their onscreen roles, particularly within contemporary dialogues on ethnic masculinity and feminine independence that were being played out in Hollywood cinema in this period.⁴⁷

Archival materials and editions for primary sources

The audience responses to the texts of *Ben-Hur* appearing in this thesis have been selected according to their exhibition of at least one of the following aspects: reference to specific emotions, or manifestation of emotions in the novel; discussion of the actual, or intended, arousal of emotional responses in readers to the content of the novel; testimony to creative production inspired by the novel that was intended to represent or solicit certain patterns of emotional response in other readers; and the solicited and/or actual emotional responses of readers to the publicized narrative of the novel's composition. The manner in which emotions in audience responses to the narrative texts of *Ben-Hur* are represented changes with the evolution of text, author, and the context of reception, and the image we receive of this transformation is primarily informed by the documentation of these responses surviving in the archives.

For the purposes of this project, the best sources for understanding the dynamics of emotion in response to the texts are self-reports generated by receivers. Self-reported emotional experience is used as evidence in both psychological studies of the connection between stimulus and emotional response,⁴⁸ and in audience research in media studies.⁴⁹ Fortunately a remarkable number of individual self-reported emotional experiences are retained in the Wallace collection at the Lilly Library, University of Indiana, Bloomington. Yet, as these are primarily in the form of letters to the author

⁴⁶ Scholarship from Plantinga (2009), Smith (1995) and Tan (1996) will inform discussion of emotions and audience engagement in classical Hollywood cinema.

⁴⁷ Williams (2012).

⁴⁸ For instance, in a study of emotional contagion by Lishner, Cooter, and Zald (2008), self-reports, although questionable due to their high level of subjectivity, 'remain the only way to assess the experiential aspects of emotion... it remains unclear whether a physiological response that occurs after presentation of a stimulus precedes or follows an emotional experience evoked by the stimulus' (237).

⁴⁹ A lecture at the Society for Cognitive Studies of the Moving Image conference delivered by Andreas Gregersen (2015) described a study which employed biological feedback and self-reporting to understand the experience of emotion in the viewing of a television drama. In this study, measurement of electrodermal activity was used to trace changes in levels of bodily activation, or 'arousal'. Yet, the subjective connotation, or 'valence' of the arousal (whether feelings of pleasure, fear, anger, etc. were experienced) could only be measured through self-reporting of emotional experience.

from readers, consistency in detail in relationship to the socioeconomic, religious, and ethnic background of the reporting individuals, description of the reception context, and description of textual material stimulating the emotional experience is not always present.

The collection of emotional responses to the theatrical and cinematic texts of *Ben-Hur* proves to be a more complicated process, due to the almost complete absence of individual responses in the archives containing materials surrounding the production, promotion, and reception of the Klaw and Erlanger melodrama and the 1907 and 1925 film adaptations. Yet, there is much documentation related to audiences' lasting engagement with these performance adaptations of *Ben-Hur* in the form of souvenir programmes, newspaper reviews, and versions of the novel published with photographs of the players featured in these adaptations. In the case of the 1925 *Ben-Hur*, fan magazines offer an interesting perspective on venues for (especially) female spectators' lingering 'post-movie' processing of the film. These published sources themselves are products of audiences' willingness to continue engagement with *Ben-Hur* in performance. Yet the emotional responses explicitly reported in these materials tend to be written by professional critics, and the voice of the 'ordinary' spectator is for the most part diminished. Also complicating is the factor of the theatre exhibitor's or film studio's influence in generating much of this circulating discourse about the *Ben-Hur* text(s) in performance.⁵⁰ Sometimes distinguishing promotion from response can be difficult. However, the availability of these resources draws attention to the ways in which self-identified representatives from existing communities of reception—such as theatre criticism circles, church groups, fan clubs, and the Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur—publicly recorded and described collective viewing, emotional responses to the performed text, and responses to other audience members' reactions to the performed text.

Heavily implicated throughout this entire study is the notion of authorial identity, and the relationship between author and receiver, as perceived by representatives from both sides of this relationship. Wallace's public persona was reinforced by the author during the remainder of his life, in part through his persistent personal correspondence with readers. By contrast, when we try to reconstruct the audience reception of Klaw and Erlanger's melodrama *Ben-Hur* (1899-1920), we must rely almost exclusively on published reviews; despite Wallace's advisory role in the

⁵⁰ See Dyer (1998: 61) for fan magazines' long-established complicity with studios in the representation of films and their stars.

adaptation, the individuals writing to him continued to emphasise the novel and the impact they stated it had on their lives. While we do not have very much evidence to construct a reliable account of Wallace's source material and composition process, apart from the author's later commentary on them, the Lilly Library contains a record of the negotiations between the author and publisher Harper and Brothers and exhibitors Klaw and Erlanger in advance of the stageplay's production in 1899. These materials yield important insight into the author's anticipation of audience responses to a dramatic adaptation of his novel. The Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York Public Library holds a scrapbook containing an impressively vast collection of promotional materials and published reviews associated with the Klaw and Erlanger production over the twenty-one-year period of its circulation.

The Cinematic Arts Library at the University of Southern California and the Margaret Herrick Library at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences offer a collection of materials related to the production of MGM's 1925 *Ben-Hur*. Correspondence among the filmmakers, early production notes and treatments, and various versions of the continuity provide a rich perspective on the extent to which the authors of this adaptation exhibited a certain amount of anxiety in their imagination of the potential for the film, particularly its visual portrayal of the religious material, to offend the personal sensibilities of audiences. The filmmakers cite specific narrative strategies as instrumental in their attempt to manipulate audiences' favourable reception of the film, and this provides a fascinating glimpse of the aims of the film text to solicit specific emotional responses from viewers.

Only recently have scholars of *Ben-Hur* (1925) begun to engage meaningfully with the material documenting the film's production,⁵¹ and much of what I include in my survey of imagined/solicited emotions in relation to this production story has not been discussed in scholarship. Even less attention has been given to the archival materials documenting self-reported responses to the novel, and many of the letters and other contemporary documents I cite in this dissertation have never before been considered in detail in scholarship, but merely referenced fleetingly as evidence for the phenomenon of engagement of readers with the novel. Recent and forthcoming work of Howard Miller and Jon Solomon⁵² has opened the door to archival investigation of such 'receiver'-generated responses to the literary, theatrical, and filmic incarnations of *Ben-Hur*, and has spurred me to scrutinise these archival resources and place them in

⁵¹ Scodel (2013); Williams (2012).

⁵² Miller (forthcoming; 2008); Solomon (forthcoming; 2012).

conversation with the narrative text within a multidimensional analysis of the ‘events’ of *Ben-Hur*’s reception.

The sources of documentation of production and reception histories related to the primary text(s) within this project will be discussed in appropriate detail as they emerge in the course of this thesis. The featured archives from which I have gathered these materials are: Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (Beverly Hills, California); American Periodicals Database (accessed via Proquest); Bill Douglas Cinema Museum Special Collections, University of Exeter (Exeter, United Kingdom); British Film Institute (London, United Kingdom); Crawfordsville District Public Library (Crawfordsville, Indiana); Indiana Historical Society (Indianapolis, Indiana); Library of Congress (Washington, D.C., digital collections); Lilly Library, University of Indiana, Bloomington (Bloomington, Indiana); Media History Project (digitally accessed);⁵³ Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library (New York, New York); Music Library, Stanford University (Palo Alto, California); and Cinematic Arts Library, University of Southern California (Los Angeles, California). Abbreviations for the archives cited throughout this dissertation appear in ‘Index of Abbreviations for Featured Archives’.

The edition of the text *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* referenced for commentary throughout this dissertation is the 1998 Oxford World Classics edition with an introduction by David Mayer. Any commentary on Wallace’s original manuscript (retained in the Lilly Library) or other editions will be noted. The edition of William Young’s script for the Klaw and Erlanger production appears in Mayer (1994). Kalem Studios’ *Ben-Hur* (1907) survives in the Library of Congress. Wallace’s 1891 libretto, *Ben-Hur in Dramatic Tableaux and Pantomime*, is accessible via the Library of Congress digital collections.⁵⁴ The version of MGM’s 1925 production referenced in this thesis is a restored edition of the film adapted for DVD by Oasis Media in 2006, with an original musical score by Carl Davis, performed by the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. The version of *Ben-Hur* (1959) referenced here is a 2005 DVD release from Warner Home Video.

⁵³ The digital library of the Media History Project is accessible here: <http://mediahistoryproject.org/>.

⁵⁴ Digitised in PDF form here: <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/General.23734.1> (Accessed 8 December 2015).

Thesis Structure

The chapters in this thesis are structured according to a joint consideration for chronology, reception context, and medium. Chapter 1 establishes the historical context for the emergence of *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880), with reference to the author's biographical background, literary models, and the circulating concepts of Rome, Christianity, and Judaism in late nineteenth-century United States that may have influenced Wallace's interpretation of Judaea during the life of Christ. This chapter features analyses of the dynamics of emotion in the novel and its invitations for readers' emotional engagement. Chapter 2 evaluates responses to Wallace's novel, most of which fall between the novel's publication (1880) and the date of Wallace's death (1905). Special attention will be given to the emotional communities of engagement that emerged in response to *Ben-Hur*, and the strategies through which Wallace encouraged certain patterns of audience response. Chapter 2 is the only chapter in the thesis exclusively dedicated to a discussion of audience responses, due to the vast number of responses to the novel available for analysis. This chapter is also designed to set up a comprehensive survey of the types of engagement readers exhibited, to be placed in comparison with patterns of audience response to the subsequent adaptations in succeeding chapters.

Chapter 3 addresses *Ben-Hur*'s adaptation into a performed text in theatre and cinema, from 1889 (with the publication of Wallace's libretto, which allowed his novel to be performed in *tableaux* and pantomime prior to the emergence of the Klaw and Erlanger production) to 1920. Within this chapter I explore emotions as they relate to the composition of and contemporary responses to the performance of Wallace's *Ben-Hur in Dramatic Tableaux and Pantomime*, Klaw and Erlanger's melodrama, *Ben-Hur*, and Kalem Studios' 1907 film, *Ben-Hur*. Chapter 4 deals exclusively with MGM Studios' 1925 film, *Ben-Hur*, and its re-release in 1931. Issues of emotion in the production, film text, and popular cultural response comprise the major sections of this chapter. This project is by nature a diachronic study with numerous changes in textual medium. As such, the chapters in this thesis include brief orientations to relevant aspects of the historical context surrounding the featured text's emergence, grounded within an introduction to the major theoretical approaches I will be using to analyse the dynamics of emotion in that text.

I mentioned above that William Wyler's 1959 *Ben-Hur* film is the most familiar narrative incarnation of *Ben-Hur*, both in popular culture and in scholarship. Yet, due to the parameters of this project in its current form as a PhD thesis, Wyler's film will not

be featured as a central text. The adaptations of Wallace's novel featured in this study are those directly inspired by the novel, and occurring in more or less immediate chronological succession. Wyler's film demonstrates a departure in both the narrative structure (for instance, with the complete omission of the character of Egyptian Iras), and in the contemporary socio-cultural and political issues with which the film engages. The historical context for the production and reception of this film belongs to a different set of American cultural challenges and issues of self-identification (derived from the Second World War, the Cold War, the spread of McCarthyism, the foundation of Israel, and other major developments) than we see operating in relationship to the *Ben-Hur* texts central to this thesis.⁵⁵ This is perhaps a reason why many scholars have previously engaged meaningfully with this film and only marginally with the other narrative versions (least of all the archetype of Wallace's novel).⁵⁶ Despite this, some consideration for the dynamics of emotion in the 1959 film text and its responses will provide a valuable comparandum for the central textual material in places where it will serve to highlight the importance of the operation of the text within the 'event of reception'. In this paradigm, when the 'event of reception' transforms significantly, so does the textual reconstruction of the ancient world, in order to provide a vision of antiquity that speaks specifically to the receiving culture.

If we do not prioritise emotions as a factor in the reception of *Ben-Hur*, we will be denying a significant quality of the documentation of receivers' engagement with these texts. We will be denying a crucial aspect of the meanings readers of *Ben-Hur* in its various narrative forms derived from these texts—meanings which inspired generations to re-experience the story of *Ben-Hur* on a grand scale for 150 years and counting. The remarkable collection of surviving materials of audience response enhances the scholarly interpretation of the text in the original context of its reception and offers the privilege of understanding the individual, subjective experience of reception of the classical world.

⁵⁵ Not to mention the technological developments in cinema made during this period that require a shift away from the model for textual analysis used for the 1925 film in this thesis.

⁵⁶ See for instance Solomon (2001: 177-224), Cyrino (2005: 59-88), Theodorakopoulos (2010), and Fitzgerald (2001).

CHAPTER 1: THE NOVEL (1880) AND ITS INVITATIONS FOR EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT

1.1. INTRODUCTION

Statuary Hall in Washington, D.C. holds a representation of Lew Wallace, with the words ‘Soldier Author Governor’ inscribed into the sides of the base. When the statue was unveiled in 1910, Indiana governor Thomas R. Marshall gave an address attesting to the significance of Wallace’s legacy, not only for the state of Indiana, but for the whole of the United States, as the location of the commemorative statue implies. The following passage from Marshall’s address introduces central questions and considerations this chapter will explore related to emotions and the reception of the ancient world in Lew Wallace’s historical novel *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880):

Wallace...saw the cause for which he fought triumph; he saw the scars of war which he helped to inflict pass from the sight almost of the body politic; he returned to the peaceful pursuits of civil life; he became executive and diplomat; he succeeded everywhere, and then he wrote the story of the Cross....He thought that there were but two supreme passions to control the human soul....These supreme passions were his loyalty to the Divine and his loyalty to the principles of his native land. One he embalmed in his immortal work; the other he embalmed in his immortal life....While many men may appear to adorn one of the twin pillars—Christian civilization and constitutional liberty—upon which the arch of the Republic rests, it will be years to come before there will be another man whose medallion like that of Wallace can grace both of them.¹

Marshall initially lauds Wallace’s political and military contributions to the development of a free, unified American nation, alluding to Wallace’s advocacy for the abolition of slavery, his service as a Union general in the Civil War, and his governorship of the New Mexico territory from 1878 to 1880. He then introduces the final element of Wallace’s legacy, ‘the story of the Cross’, and claims its profound influence in the strengthening of the United States’ fundamental ideology and cultural conscience. Marshall exalts the 1880 novel as a ‘story of the Cross’, a narrative of sacrifice that provides for American readers a manifestation of Wallace’s alleged affective allegiance (‘supreme passions...loyalty to the Divine

¹ ‘Proceedings in Statuary Hall and the Senate and the House of Representatives upon the Unveiling, Reception, and Acceptance from the State of Indiana of the Statue of General Lew Wallace: January 11, 1910’ (14-15), CDPL.

and...loyalty to the principles of his native land') to the vision of an integrated union, characterised by 'Christian civilization and constitutional liberty'.

Marshall elevates Wallace as a model of the 'supreme passions' of loyalty to the 'Republic', an entity Marshall recognises as fundamentally defined, in part, by Christianity. Did Wallace's 'story of the Cross' indeed motivate Americans to recover a unified cultural identity in 'loyalty to the Divine'? Did Wallace's *Ben-Hur* create a particular reconstruction of the ancient world, and the life of Christ, that provided readers with an 'emotional community' associated with Christian spirituality that worked to transcend the residual ideological, political, and social divisions following the Civil War? How did the novel's narrative structures, circulation, promotion, and reception create a reconstruction of first-century Judaea, embedded with a particular definition of Christianity, which would invite American communities to engage emotionally with Wallace's narrative on a number of levels? Lastly, how did the public perception of Wallace as conveyor of this narrative influence the growth of these communities of shared emotional experiences?

In order to explore these issues of the interaction between the authorial invitations for emotional engagement with the text, and actual emotional responses to the text, it will be of utmost importance first to explore patterns of representing emotions within the text itself—the aim of this chapter. In order to understand the narrative strategies Wallace employs to create these solicitations for nineteenth-century readers' emotional engagement, it will be beneficial first to discuss *Ben-Hur*'s operation within the tradition of the historical novel, a generic category Wallace claimed to have emulated in his novels. This approach will identify specific narrative devices within that tradition that influence representations of emotions, devices which Wallace chooses both to borrow and to alter in *Ben-Hur*.

This chapter will also draw attention to a second literary genre which appears to be invoked in *Ben-Hur*, whether or not this was the conscious intention of the author. As a 'Tale of the Christ', the novel exhibits certain stylistic elements characteristic of the contemporary genre of American biblical fiction.² This chapter will propose the argument that Wallace's novel is an innovative fusion of historical novel and American biblical fiction, and as such was able to manifest the cultural functions of both of these genres in American reception communities. This approach not only informs this

² Solomon (2015) argues quite convincingly for the influence of ancient sources, particularly Josephus and Plutarch, on the plot progression, historical detail and stylistic elements Wallace incorporates into his narrative. For the purposes of this project, I argue that we must look to *contemporary* generic influences to understand Wallace's strategies for representing emotions and inviting readers' emotional engagement with the narrative.

project's focus on *Ben-Hur*'s capacity to ignite a cultural sensation, but it also facilitates an understanding of the harmony Wallace struck between the potential educational, entertainment, and devotional functions of his work that, at the time of its publication, made it and its cultural influence truly unique.

Once these generic models have been recognised for their influence on Wallace's approach to emotions, an in-depth examination of the specific invitations for emotional engagement within the novel itself can take place. Particular attention will be given to issues of character development as a means of invoking the reader's personal interest in the historical/biblical setting. Of specific concern will be Wallace's attribution of specific emotions, and emotionologies (socio-cultural codes for expressing and managing emotions) to Romans, Jews, and proto-Christians.³ Wallace's hierarchical arrangement of these emotionologies according to the extent of their correspondence with nineteenth-century American conceptions of the interrelationship between emotion, national identity, and religious faith will also be observed, as this demonstrates the connection between the text and the reception context.

It ought to be mentioned here that it is difficult to unearth an authentic narrative of Wallace's composition of *Ben-Hur*, and to identify with absolute certainty the precise source materials, whether ancient or contemporary, which influenced his representations of first-century Judaea. The author definitely conducted extensive research for *Ben-Hur* at the Library of Congress,⁴ and Jon Solomon has indicated a multiplicity of classical sources that are clearly present in passages of *Ben-Hur*, particularly given evidence indicating that Wallace had access to these materials. Yet very few of Wallace's research notes are extant, and there are almost no in-text citations in *Ben-Hur*. Wallace was also known to obfuscate when discussing the sources he used.⁵ For instance, in his lecture 'How I Came to Write *Ben-Hur*', Wallace emphasises the significance of the historical and geographical accuracy of his novel, thanks to his use of reputable sources, yet he does not explicitly name any of these sources, save for a vague reference to a 'German publication':

I examined catalogues of books and maps, and sent for everything likely to be useful, and when at length I began writing it was with a chart always before my eyes on the wall — a German publication, showing the towns and villages, all the sacred places,

³ As stated in the introduction, 'emotionology' is a term derived from studies in history of emotions, and is defined as 'the attitudes or standards that a society, or a definable group within a society, maintains toward basic emotions and their appropriate expression; ways that institutions reflect and encourage these attitudes in human conduct' (Stearns and Stearns, 1985: 813).

⁴ Solomon (2015) 61.

⁵ Solomon (2015: 35) points out an instance in 1873, when Wallace writes to his sister-in-law, claiming 'I have gone through everything on the shelves [of the Library of Congress] relating to the Jews. From the mass I selected two works indispensable to my plot'. These sources are not named.

the heights, the depressions.... Travellers then told me of the birds, animals, vegetation, and seasons. Indeed, I think the necessity for constant references to authorities saved me mistakes which certainly would have occurred had I trusted to a tourist's memory.⁶

The Wallace manuscript in the Lilly Library contains fourteen pages of Wallace's notes on Antioch, particularly concerning the layout of the city, the religious communities, and some details of the city's history. At the top of the first page is listed a British source, presumably for the entirety of the following notes on Antioch, Smith's *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Geography* (1870). In this example, Wallace's allusions to ancient sources are borrowed directly from Smith as well: 'Love of frivolous amusements carried to a passion in the contests of the Hippodrome. On such occasions the people broke into open factions and bloodshed.... Julian said that Antioch had more buffoons than citizens.'⁷ The issue of ambiguity in the source material Wallace has left behind is highly problematic for any thorough investigation of his claims of authenticity.⁸ However, at the time of Wallace's promotion of his novel, he was renowned as a master of communicating a veritable picture of life in ancient Judaea during the time of Christ (as Edward Bulwer-Lytton was known for his 'authentic portrayal' of life in Pompeii before Vesuvius' eruption).

Ben-Hur's ascension to memorialisation as an influence in the healing of residual ideological divisions after the Civil War through its missionary function renders it a singular cultural phenomenon. As the work of numerous scholars on the 'Ben-Hur phenomenon' has attested, and as my own research will demonstrate, the narrative of *Ben-Hur* was further transformed and adapted, and its entertainment potential expanded with each consecutive widespread incarnation of the narrative, namely the Klaw and Erlanger stageplay, Fred Niblo's 1925 film, and William Wyler's 1959 cinematic masterpiece. In the twentieth century the secular appeal of *Ben-Hur* rose, and generated new emotional responses in American audiences that in turn reflected cultural attitudes toward issues of imperialism, gender, fashion, and decadence. Yet in the late nineteenth century, American reading communities rallied

⁶ 'How I Came to Write *Ben-Hur*' (12). This quotation is taken from Wallace's handwritten booklet (LL), from which he would read his lectures. Although this booklet is undated, I have been able to deduce from newspaper advertisements in California and Washington for Wallace's lecture entitled 'How I Came to Write *Ben-Hur*', this particular lecture was performed during Wallace's lecture tour of 1894. This lecture is also printed in Wallace's autobiography (1906: 926-36).

⁷ 'Notes on Antioch' (pre-1880); Wallace MS II, LL. This passage corresponds word-for-word to Smith's description of the people of Antioch, including his particular reference to Julian's claim that Antioch held 'more buffoons than citizens' (Smith, 1870: 143).

⁸ In light of Wallace's prevarications about his sources, Malamud (2009: 137) has questioned whether Wallace's 'Judaea' could actually be a representation of the topography of the New Mexican frontier, where Wallace was living as governor during the final year of *Ben-Hur*'s composition.

largely behind Wallace's appeal to Christian sympathy to experience the salvation of emotional, social, and spiritual healing in a time of disunity and social tension.

1.2. WALLACE'S GENERIC MODELS AND THEIR CULTURAL FUNCTION IN THE AMERICAN RECEPTION CONTEXT

In his lecture 'How I Came to Write *Ben-Hur*', which Wallace delivered periodically during his lecture tours of the 1890s, the author explains the distinction between 'Roman' and 'Jewish' elements that influenced the structure of his novel. Wallace claims that a sketch of peoples and their areas of influence was an important background to establish for his readers' understanding of the dawning of Christianity:

I decided...to show the religious and political condition of the world at the time of the coming. Perhaps these conditions would demonstrate a necessity for a Saviour....The commitment to the galley, the sea-fight, the chariot-race and its preceding orgies were the Roman phases; just as the love marking the Hur family, the steady pursuit of vengeance by the son, and his easy conversion by Simonides to the alluring idea of the Messiah ruler like Caesar, were Jewish.⁹

Places of war, competition, and decadence are associated with Rome here. Conversely, multiple modes of affective experience are identified as 'Jewish': love for the family, vengeance, and conversion. Here 'conversion...to the alluring idea' does not mean conversion to Christianity and the idea of the Messiah as a spiritual saviour, but refers instead to Judah Ben-Hur's misguided belief in the Messiah as a political and military force on earth, set to overthrow Roman rule over the Jews.

The following discussion will present the ways in which Wallace constructs these 'phases' in *Ben-Hur* by employing strategies for emotional engagement borrowed from historical fiction and American biblical fiction. Wallace embeds these strategies within contemporary circulating attitudes toward Rome and Judaism in the United States, rendering images of Roman-occupied Judaea in *Ben-Hur* that are particularly attuned to the novel's immediate reception context. Wallace thus composes a novel that is *about* the Near East but *for* the United States, generating a literary response to crucial issues of cultural self-identification during a time when many Americans were looking to the genre of the novel to recover a sense of cultural unity following the Civil War.¹⁰ There was an anticipation that a 'Great American Novel' would surface from the highly popular genre of the historical novel/romance,¹¹ with its integration of realism and

⁹ Wallace (1906) 931-2.

¹⁰ Thompson (2012) 347.

¹¹ Fluck (2011:117) mentions that the terms 'historical novel' and 'historical romance' were used interchangeably in the nineteenth century, suggesting that 'novel and romance effectively complement

romanticism. This novel was believed capable of accomplishing the ‘goal of integration’, the drawing together of the individual and the collective, the personal and the public, Americans from diverse regional, religious, ethnic, and political backgrounds into one body.¹² The unusual success of *Ben-Hur* testified to Wallace’s ability to create a novel that would be perceived as a representation of American cultural history. *Ben-Hur* provided American readers with a kind of common ancestor—fictional protagonist Judah Ben-Hur—whose experience played out a reconciliation of the different views of Rome, Judaism, and Christianity in the American consciousness.

Ben-Hur and historical fiction

Wallace acknowledges in his autobiography that when he first began experimenting with historical fiction writing, Sir Walter Scott was considered to be a dominant voice in this genre, whose readers Wallace sought to draw to his own work.¹³ Scott, perceived by later authors and scholars as the archetypal ‘father of the historical novel’, in the early nineteenth century introduced a practice of writing history in an imaginative, personalised way. He constructed a fictional narrative (with fictional central characters) and incorporated it into the ‘grand pattern of historical events’, which he would use, and sometimes alter, to suit the purposes of his narrative.¹⁴ Thus Scott’s historical novel came into being, and established the focal point for readers’ engagement with what literary theorist and critic of the historical novel Georg Lukács refers to as ‘what matters in the historical novel...the social and human motives which led men to think, feel, and act just as they did in historical reality’.¹⁵

Whether Scott featured characters in eighteenth-century Scotland (*The Heart of Midlothian*, 1818) or twelfth-century England (*Ivanhoe*, 1820), he rendered the psychology of his characters essential to the experience of history he invited his reader to have. Harold Orel theorises that Scott aimed to construct the emotional experience of his characters on the basis that emotions (both in their internal experience and external

each other: the novel can provide an air of reality, while the romance can take advantage of the license of fiction to create an imaginary space for...recurrent motifs of the historical romance’ that normally included adventure, the supernatural, and a love story.

¹² Ibid, 123.

¹³ Wallace (1906) 63.

¹⁴ Leisy (1970) 8.

¹⁵ Lukács (1962) 42. Lukács indicates that what makes the ‘necessary anachronism’ necessary is its function as an opportunity for readers to derive from emotionally familiar characters a motivation to ‘make history’ themselves, and to visualise their encounters with social, economic, ideological, and political issues in their community as an essential part of the historical process (24). See also De Groot (2010: 27-28).

manifestations) are universal.¹⁶ Indeed, Scott claims in his dedicatory epistle prefacing *Ivanhoe* that in his rendering of historical fiction there exists an ‘extensive neutral ground, the large proportion, that is, of manners and sentiments which are common to us and to our ancestors, having been handed down unaltered from them to us, or which, arising out of the principles of our common nature, must have existed alike in either state of society’.¹⁷ However, earlier in the same epistle, Scott indicates that he is making a special effort to design, or in his words, *translate* the emotional experience of his characters to invoke more effectively the sympathy of his nineteenth-century readers: ‘It is necessary for exciting interest of any kind that the subject assumed should be, as it were, translated into the manners, as well as the language, of the age we live in’.¹⁸

Georg Lukács calls this strategy of rendering characters from the past emotionally accessible to readers in the nineteenth-century Scott’s ‘necessary anachronism’ that ‘consists...simply in allowing his characters to express feelings and thoughts about real, historical relationships in a much clearer way than the actual men and women of the time could have done’.¹⁹ It is important to consider the operation of characters in historical fiction within the ‘necessary anachronism’ paradigm in light of Wallace’s narrative tendencies. Wallace employs or subverts the ‘necessary anachronism’, depending on the extent to which he invites his readers’ emotional engagement with a given character. For instance, when Jewish protagonist Judah Ben-Hur falls out with his friend, the Roman Messala (the primary antagonist in the novel), Wallace appeals to his readers’ sympathy with Ben-Hur in the face of Messala’s offensive remarks: ‘The superior airs assumed had been offensive to him in the beginning; soon they became irritating, and at last an acute smart. Anger lies close by this point in all of us...’ (*Ben-Hur*, 85).

By contrast, Wallace frequently renders the Roman villain, Messala, emotionally aberrant, directing his readers’ attention to the spatiotemporal distance between Messala and themselves. Messala’s thoughts and feelings are antiquated, and often explained as resultant from the idiosyncracies of his ethnic identity, underscoring the foreignness of ‘Roman’ emotional behaviour to nineteenth-century American sensibilities:

[the reader] must be reminded that reverence as a quality of the Roman mind was fast breaking down...The old religion had nearly ceased to be a faith...The young Messala...had caught the habit and manner...a languid utterance affected as the best vehicle to convey the idea of general indifference (*Ben-Hur*, 82).

¹⁶ Orel (1995) 13.

¹⁷ Scott (1821) xviii.

¹⁸ Ibid, xvii.

¹⁹ Lukács (1962) 63.

This would not have been an unusual characterisation of the moral decline of Rome in Wallace's time, as in the late nineteenth century the United States struggled with an ambivalent cultural self-identification with Rome as an entity simultaneously worthy of emulation and abhorrence. From the Revolution onwards, Americans were conscious of the potential for their conception of ancient Roman civilization to aid in the construction of cultural identity. When the United States was born from revolution, the vision of Rome provided a cornerstone of political unity. American revolutionary leaders assumed the names of Roman opponents of tyranny, such as Brutus and Cato, in order to invoke Rome as 'a source of authority prior, and in opposition, to that of divinely sanctioned kingship'.²⁰ The high value placed upon classical education instilled an enduring reverence for Rome in American culture (at least in affluent circles).

In the nineteenth century, however, America's self-perception in relation to Rome became more complicated, as issues surrounding slavery, civil war, Christian pluralism, religion in conflict with scientific advancement, economic change, and the growth of American imperialism challenged cultural unity.²¹ Attempts to escape identification with Rome began to emerge. Some features of the Roman social and political structure, religion, and value system—slavery, imperial dominion, paganism, decadence, and sexual indulgence—were marked as potentially dangerous if inherited by American society. Due to the focus upon Rome's decline as an *empire*—the interest in Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii*, the popularity among Europeans and Americans of tours to the ruins in Rome and Pompeii, the production of paintings featuring ruined classical architecture²²—increased attention was placed upon the fall of Rome. Americans became concerned with the question of how the United States, founded upon the Roman virtues of democracy and freedom from monarchy, and now a growing empire by means of westward expansion across North America, could defend itself from meeting a similar end.

American ambivalence toward Rome was further expressed through the consumption of art and entertainment. The term 'conspicuous consumption' had recently emerged in the United States, and American manifestations of it were

²⁰ Edwards (1999) 8.

²¹ Malamud (2009: 80) describes avoidance of self-identification as 'Roman' with both sides of the American Civil War.

²² Bann (1999: 46) includes a discussion of the painter Granet's attempt to recontextualise the ancient ruins, juxtaposing them to modern structures, sometimes with similar purposes (e.g. a ruined temple beside a modern church) and creating a visual link between them. This, argues Bann, falls within Foucault's observation of a 'possession and dispossession which initiates the nineteenth-century regime of historical-mindedness'.

commonly associated with Rome's decline through luxury.²³ Americans were highly aware of the material enjoyment they could derive from economic prosperity, and frequently indulged in 'Roman' artworks, such as the paintings of Lawrence Alma-Tadema.²⁴ The longing for the sensory immediacy of imperial Rome and the lavish, material pleasures associated with it was further translated into the middle-class American home. Miles Orvell describes perceptions of the home in the 1880s and 1890s as a 'main focus of Victorian aesthetic comfort', wherein women reconciled their role as moral and spiritual guardian of the household with their increased desire to participate as independent consumers through the purchase of luxurious home furnishings.²⁵ According to Orvell, these American aspirations toward abundance carried a 'Roman face', an exhibition of 'imperial pleasures' on a domestic scale,²⁶ perhaps in emulation of the aesthetic sensibilities visible in public works projects constructed in the style of Roman architecture.²⁷ Amidst the lure of decadence and the fear of its association with downfall, many Americans cultivated a revival of interest and enthusiasm for personal redemption through Christianity.

At the core of this major shift in moral connotations of Rome was a shift in focus from Republican to Imperial Rome. Wallace voiced this distinction in a 1903 speech entitled 'Spirit of 62', upon the erection of a bronze tablet with the 310 names of those members of Wabash College, Indiana, who had died in the Civil War. He insists that the Civil War occurred due to a plot among the Southern States to undermine the old Republic and pursue Empire, as Catiline had attempted:

In 1861...the United States was completely dispossessed of everything in the extreme Southern States formerly belonging to it. This, of course, was treason, and certain of the traitors seem to have adopted Catiline as their model. As he was a Senator, they were Senators. Like him, they made no disguise of their intent....[The young men of Wabash] watched the audacious Catilines in the Senate, knowing what they meant. Secession accomplished meant the destruction of the Union, which they revered as the secret of all national glory. They knew, nobody better, that an empire and a republic with frontiers touching—particularly an empire founded on slavery—could not exist harmoniously together.²⁸

Wallace's reverence for Roman Republican values in the United States, and his anxiety related to Roman Imperial vices overwhelming Republican virtues, is identifiable in *Ben-Hur* in the character of Quintus Arrius. Quintus Arrius is the only 'good' Roman in

²³ Vance (1999) 110-11.

²⁴ Wood (1983) 28; Malamud (2000) 72.

²⁵ Orvell (1989) 45-6.

²⁶ Ibid, 165. For more on Victorian conceptions of material abundance and connection to moral and social ideology, see Ibid, 40-72.

²⁷ This would be showcased particularly at the 1893 Columbian Exhibition in Chicago (Malamud, 2000: 78).

²⁸ Wallace (March 1903). The speech was published in the journal *The Wabash* 27(4) (Accessed at CDPL).

the novel, the tribune who believes in the Roman Republic, expresses concern over the breakdown of law and order in the Imperial system, and saves Judah Ben-Hur from slavery. Given Wallace's identification of the Confederacy as an 'empire founded on slavery' in the passage above, Arrius may be an embodiment of the Union's abolitionist principles. Yet while Ben-Hur is saved by Quintus Arrius from the oppression of slavery, his final spiritual (Christian) salvation is of supreme significance.

It may be rather straightforward to understand Wallace's exploration of the deviant 'Roman' emotions of Messala through an inversion of Scott's 'necessary anachronism'. There are times, however, when Wallace treats his protagonist similarly, signaling to his reader the *Jewishness* of Ben-Hur's emotional behaviour prior to his conversion to Christianity.

Henceforth [Ben-Hur] was to be the aggressor....To the purely Christian nature the presentation would have brought the weakness of remorse. Not so with Ben-Hur; his spirit had its emotions from the teachings of the first lawgiver, not the last and greatest one. He had dealt punishment, not wrong, to Messala. By permission of the Lord he had triumphed (*Ben-Hur*, 358).

This passage occurs just after Ben-Hur triumphs over Messala in the chariot race, and discovers that he is still committed to vengeance against the Romans for the unjust condemnation of his family to prison, and for his own enslavement, which transpired at Messala's behest earlier in the novel.²⁹ Ben-Hur manifests a characteristically 'Jewish' emotional behaviour distinct from that of the arguably assumed Christian readership. This is an instance of Wallace's rigorous alignment of patterns of emotional experience and expression with ethnicity and religious faith.

While Ben-Hur's justification for vengeance derives from the 'first lawgiver', the manner of vengeance Ben-Hur has dealt Messala in the chariot race ties into circulating negative perception of Jews in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. Prior to the race Ben-Hur sends his associate Sanballat to entice Messala to wager his entire fortune on his own victory in the competition. When Messala not only loses the race, but is also permanently crippled, Ben-Hur collects the money and thereafter refuses to return any of it, even when he hears of Messala's suffering in poverty. Wallace's decision to represent Ben-Hur's victory, at least in part, as an appropriation of Messala's fortune through crafty business dealings made through a clever associate invokes familiar American stereotypes of Jews, a quickly growing

²⁹ Messala sends Ben-Hur into slavery after falsely accusing him of hurling a roof tile and attempting to assassinate the Roman procurator. Solomon (2015: 43-5) describes a reference to a roof tile used as a weapon in Plutarch's *Life of Pyrrhus*, a potential source for this crucial judgment made by Messala in *Ben-Hur*.

minority during and after the Civil War.³⁰ By 1861 the number of Jewish Americans was around 150,000, triple the number fifteen years earlier.³¹ Despite Jewish participation in the Civil War, there grew a distrust of Jews on both sides of the conflict. Jews came to be labeled as speculators and black market peddlers to the extent that Union General Grant delivered an order of expulsion for all Jews living in the military government of Tennessee in December 1862.³²

Wallace himself appears to have cultivated a certain level of insecurity in his own business dealings with the Jewish exhibitors Abraham Erlanger and Marcus Klaw, who would later produce a theatrical version of *Ben-Hur* for the stage. In a letter (dated 11 February 1899) to Harper and Brothers, publisher of the novel and intermediary between Wallace and Klaw and Erlanger during the negotiations for the stageplay, Wallace voices his dissatisfaction with the allegedly obscure terms Klaw and Erlanger have offered him:

The proposal of royalty by the gentlemen who wish to dramatise Ben-Hur is quite inscrutable...It is not very complimentary to my intelligence....If they really mean business let them give me something definite, a simple proposition to which I can send a sure answer yes or no. The ~~Indians~~ savages who ~~give Jewish~~ sell things of civilized value for glass beads live further West than Indiana [Wallace's corrections].³³

In the course of this letter's composition, Wallace appears to have second-guessed his initial decision to portray Jews as disingenuous swindlers, and Native Americans as gullible 'savages'. What is compelling is Wallace's ready association of Klaw's and Erlanger's Jewish identity with his fear that they are leading him, under cover of confusing terms of royalty, into a deal from which he is not likely to profit.

While Wallace's characterisation of Ben-Hur contains concrete references to these stereotypes, at the same time, in keeping with the 'necessary anachronism' of the historical novel, Wallace needed to render his protagonist emotionally and ideologically accessible to (mostly Protestant) American readers. Ben-Hur's 'otherness' on the basis of his Jewish identity could not be pronounced to the extent that the majority of readers would find it impossible to cultivate sympathy for him before the point of his

³⁰ Scodel (2013: 323) has considered director Fred Niblo's approach to the outcome of the chariot race in his 1925 film production of the novel, where Messala is not crippled, but killed. Scodel suggests that the combination of an influential Jewish presence in the Hollywood film industry with the trend for Hollywood films to avoid controversial themes at that time perhaps contributed to this change in Wallace's original narrative, for 'rendering an enemy penniless might seem to be a stereotypically Jewish vengeance'.

³¹ Sachar (1992) 72.

³² Ibid, 74, 79. See Olegario (1999: 165) for possible socio-economic origins for these emerging stereotypes of Jews in the United States in the latter part of the nineteenth century. She observes that Jews were a 'highly visible minority' due to their significant presence in the retail sector, particularly in urban areas; despite this, their business dealings within the realm of mercantile credit were comparatively obscure during a time when there was a high level of instability in the retail market.

³³ Letter from Lew Wallace to Harper and Brothers, 11 February 1899, Wallace MSS II 1899, LL.

conversion. In fact, Wallace's anchoring of his narrative within a Jewish perspective recalls a fundamental source of identification with Judaism in Protestant American communities, as Margaret Malamud has observed: 'Political oratory, literature, and the visual arts from the Puritan era to the present have...made use of a metaphorical identification of America as the Promised Land, the New Jerusalem, and Americans as a Chosen People with a divine mission.'³⁴ Nineteenth-century American Protestants' fond identification with the people of Israel in their historical struggle for religious and political freedom is channeled through the character of Judah Ben-Hur. Wallace's direction of American sympathies to his protagonist is otherwise frequently underscored by the characterization of Ben-Hur as steeped in prominent American value systems, such as patriotism, personal ambition, and familial affection and loyalty.

A second major observation remaining for us with respect to Wallace's writing within the tradition of the historical novel is his strategy of inviting his reader into the aesthetic experience of the past, by invoking stylistic tropes strikingly similar to those employed by English author Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who garnered enthusiastic readership in the United States with his vivid reanimation of Pompeii prior to its destruction.³⁵ Bulwer-Lytton built upon Scott's method of aesthetic immersion of his reader into the historical setting by providing a running vein of historical evidence and contextualisation that communicated a concern for the preservation of historical accuracy and source citations alongside his fictional narrative. In his novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), which featured the conflict between paganism and early Christianity in Pompeii before and during the eruption of Vesuvius, Bulwer-Lytton diligently incorporated references in endnotes to legitimise the material he chose to include in his narrative.³⁶

The Last Days of Pompeii also features a vivid engagement with material culture to balance emotional engagement with historical authenticity, by reanimating the physical remains of Pompeii for his readers to physically access and affectively experience. At the end of *The Last Days of Pompeii* Bulwer-Lytton underscores the personal connection his readers could cultivate with the skeletons of the former inhabitants of the city:

As the excavators cleared on through the mass of ruin, they found the skeleton of a man literally severed in two by a prostrate column... Still after a lapse of ages, the

³⁴ Malamud (2009) 141-2.

³⁵ Ibid, 122-33.

³⁶ Orel (1995) 17-20. The content of these endnotes was largely cited from archaeologist Sir William Gell's (to whom Bulwer-Lytton dedicated his novel) *Pompeiana* (1832) (Bautz and St. Clair, 2012: 361). See also Harrison's (2011 78-9) citations of Bulwer-Lytton's literary descriptions of Gell's engravings.

traveller may survey that airy hall within whose cunning galleries and elaborate chambers once thought, reasoned, dreamed, and sinned the soul of Arbaces the Egyptian (*The Last Days of Pompeii* (3), 311-12).

As Simon Goldhill has observed, these descriptions of Bulwer-Lytton (and his reader) scanning the ruins of Pompeii and observing the skeletons who have lived their stories within the novel are accompanied by a final, and elaborate endnote, which details the archaeological veracity of the location and condition of these skeletons.³⁷ Bulwer-Lytton simultaneously immerses his reader in a vivid depiction of life in Pompeii at the moment of Vesuvius' eruption, and invites the reader to develop a personal relationship with the characters he has created by constructing personalities and back-stories for the physical remains of actual inhabitants of Pompeii. As the above quotation suggests, the reference to material culture blurs the distinction between fiction and historical authenticity. This method allows for readers, particularly those affluent English and American tourists who could afford to visit Pompeii, to be influenced by *The Last Days* in their contemplation of the ruined city and their own relationship to it.

In *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880) Wallace similarly reconstructs ancient Judaea using vivid, sensory language, in order to invite the reader to experience the historical space, yet as an observer from the nineteenth century. Wallace frequently assumes the role of intermediary between the people and places in ancient Judaea during the life of Christ and the nineteenth-century Western reader, inserting commentary concerning the impression some of his depictions may have on the modern observer. For instance, he fills the biblical story of the Nativity with historical detail: 'To understand thoroughly what happened to the Nazarene at the khan, the reader must be reminded that Eastern inns were different from the inns of the Western world... The singular management of these hostelries was the feature likely to strike a Western mind with most force. There was no host or hostess....' (*Ben-Hur*, 45). Wallace draws attention to himself as the author of this recreation of the ancient world as Bulwer-Lytton does, yet Wallace, unlike Bulwer-Lytton, does not accompany these instances with citation.³⁸ Wallace employs thorough, sensory descriptions of landscape, clothing, facial features, and interior design, and regularly inserts himself into the narrative to provide the voice of authority for his readers on objects, costumes, or activities that the author estimates would otherwise come across as too foreign without due explanation.

³⁷ Goldhill (2013) 99.

³⁸ Wallace does include footnotes in his description of the Roman galley on which Judah Ben-Hur serves as a slave, but these merely give the Latin names for offices Wallace calls 'chief of the rowers' and the 'chief pilot' (*hortator* and *rector*, respectively) (*Ben-Hur*, 128-9.). Ironically, these footnotes, presumably included to increase Wallace's integrity as a trustworthy source for historical accuracy, are placed within the historically spurious context of slaves as rowers on a Roman galley (James, 2001: 35).

This strategy is designed to render Wallace a narrator who ostensibly does not sacrifice historical accuracy for familiarity, and to provide a reconstruction of ancient Judaea so visually appealing that his work would be compared to painting,³⁹ and would even inspire paintings.⁴⁰

It is worth noting here a few concrete points about Wallace's emulation of Bulwer-Lytton. Although Wallace refrained from incorporating a preface, or footnotes or endnotes to showcase historical accuracy, he employed in his dialogue Bulwer-Lytton's style of 'invented archaic diction' to signal that characters in *Ben-Hur* belong in the past and are not meant to resemble his nineteenth-century English readers. While this technique would have carried the potential to alienate his readership from developing personal interest in his characters, Wallace, also like Bulwer-Lytton, used claims of racial continuity to characterise the inhabitants of first-century Judaea using physical descriptions of races with which nineteenth-century readers would have been familiar.⁴¹

Wallace also ends his novel with a kind of self-authentication strongly reminiscent of Bulwer-Lytton's conclusion to *The Last Days*. In Wallace's epilogue, Ben-Hur applies his considerable wealth to the 'service of the Giver', and contributes funds to the building of the Catacomb of San Calixto in Rome. The final words of the novel testify to the material legacy of Ben-Hur's act of Christian charity, blurring the line between fiction and history:⁴²

If any of my readers, visiting Rome, will make the short journey to the Catacomb of San Calixto, which is more ancient than that of San Sebastiano, he will see what became of the fortune of Ben-Hur, and give him thanks. Out of that vast tomb Christianity issued to supercede the Caesars (*Ben-Hur*, 521).

Wallace, like Bulwer-Lytton, directs his reader to a physical remnant of the ancient world that he has endowed with a back-story. Wallace ends his novel with not only an invitation to his readers, but an expectation for them to align themselves in gratitude to

³⁹ A personal letter to Lew Wallace from American poet Paul Hamilton Hayne expresses this notion (see Chapter 2, Section 5).

⁴⁰ In a 1908 publication of *The Chariot Race from Ben-Hur* by Harper and Brothers there appear prints of paintings by Sigismond Ivanowski of Roman Messala wagering against Judah Ben-Hur and of the chariot race in progress (Wallace, 1908: 86, 114). See Bautz and St. Clair (2012: 360, 378) for discussion of the similar relationship between Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* and painting.

⁴¹ Bautz and St. Clair (2012) 366. One of these 'racial cues' is present when we are first introduced to the character of Judah Ben-Hur, a Judaeian prince and our protagonist: 'An observer skilled in the distinctions of race... would have soon discovered him to be of Jewish descent.... The front of the Isrealite... was low and broad; his nose long, with expanded nostrils; his upper lip, slightly shading the lower one, short and curving to the dimpled corners, like a cupid's bow; points which... gave his face the softness, strength, and beauty peculiar to his race' (*Ben-Hur*, 81).

⁴² It can also be noted that Ben-Hur's relationship to wealth has changed since his conversion to Christianity, in sharp contrast to the distinct lack of charity and Christian sympathy he demonstrates following his defeat of Messala in the chariot race.

the now quasi-historical Judah Ben-Hur ('any of my readers...will...give him thanks'). This final appeal also carries special messages to the American reader of Wallace's novel, not only as a prospective mindful visitor to the catacombs, but as a potential agent for a shift in predominant conceptions of cultural unity in the United States. Wallace, having written the Crucifixion as the site for Ben-Hur's conversion to Christianity, employs the rhetoric of Christianity itself emerging from a tomb, as Christ emerged from the tomb at the point of his resurrection. Wallace calls his readers to celebrate Christianity for its capability to override the corruption of empire, both in ancient Rome and, implicitly, in the post-Civil-War United States.

While the British tradition of the historical novel was a clear influence on *Ben-Hur* (1880), it is also important to note the novel's engagement with special features of the American historical novel. One of these American models was literary historian Walter Prescott's *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843), written in the style of a historical novel, yet retaining core features of history writing borrowed from Edward Gibbon.⁴³ Wallace wrote his own debut novel, entitled *The Fair God* (1873), on Prescott's theme of the Spanish colonisation of Mexico and claimed to have integrated into his own fiction the elements of adventure, romance, heroism, and personal and religious conflicts that he valued in Prescott's work.⁴⁴

Margaret Malamud suggests that Wallace's borrowed elements of the 'dime-novel' genre, the collection of literature that featured the frontier, or the 'wild west'. Malamud observes that Wallace's central characters are challenged with issues of revenge and the demonstration of masculinity on the 'frontier' of Judaea, a harsh landscape of physical danger, lawlessness, and the struggle for survival, as illustrated in dime novels by James Fenimore Cooper and authors who emulated his style.⁴⁵ Indeed, Ben-Hur is reminiscent of Cooper's 'scout' or 'renegade' character, who can disguise himself as a member of the dominant culture in order to infiltrate it, and even to facilitate its destruction.⁴⁶ Ben-Hur 'disguises himself' as a Roman when Quintus Arrius adopts him, and assumes the Roman *habitus* so skillfully that Messala's friend Drusus at the orgy in Antioch observes, '...my Messala, Pollux was not more like Castor than [the son of] Arrius is like thee' (*Ben-Hur*, 233). Additionally, one of Ben-

⁴³ Rathbun (2001) 94.

⁴⁴ Wallace (1906) 88-90.

⁴⁵ Malamud (2009) 136-139. Wallace's library inventory, held in the Papers of Susan and Lew Wallace collection at the Indiana Historical Society library does include multiple works by James Fenimore Cooper. However, we cannot deduce from this list alone whether *Ben-Hur* was influenced by Cooper's work, for the list is dated 19 years following the publication of *Ben-Hur*.

⁴⁶ Henderson (1974) 52, 63.

Hur's long-lasting aspirations is to serve in the Roman army, to learn from Rome how to make war, to become a part of the dominant, oppressive civilization just to destroy it (*Ben-Hur*, 111).

Protagonist Ben-Hur primarily *experiences* historical change rather than precipitating it. According to Henderson's model, Cooper and Prescott are 'holist' historical novelists, emphasising the system of historical change that happens organically as a result of a convergence of political, social, and natural events in which their heroes operate. Progressives, such as George Bancroft, feature in their histories the 'Great Man', (a Washington or a Jefferson, in his exempla) who, endowed with extraordinary charisma and moral rectitude, is responsible for facilitating historical change virtually singlehandedly.⁴⁷ Wallace creates in *Ben-Hur* (1880) a convenient compromise between these approaches, in that his most central character, Judah Ben-Hur, is not a progressive's 'Great Man', but more of a holist's 'representative social type', a character who encounters moral dilemmas, temptations, and doubts on his journey toward eventual conversion to Christianity; this journey is personal, allowing the reader to participate.⁴⁸ On the other hand, *Ben-Hur* also does feature a 'Great Man', namely Christ, who is a compassionate, morally righteous, divinely guided engineer of historical change on a grand scale.

Ben-Hur and American biblical fiction

Wallace's historical narrative is bracketed by a tale of Christ's life, wherein the Nativity and the Crucifixion constitute the opening and closing events of the book. Where the two narratives regularly overlap, and eventually culminate, is in Ben-Hur's conversion to Christianity. Wallace avoided aligning himself publicly with a specific church or religious denomination,⁴⁹ although in his autobiography he refers to being raised by a stepmother who imposed strict church attendance on him,⁵⁰ and in his youth attending a county seminary.⁵¹ The rendering of the religious episodes in *Ben-Hur* carries stylistic reminiscences of American biblical fiction, a genre that was consumed almost

⁴⁷ Ibid, 21-37.

⁴⁸ However, Ben-Hur is externally not a representative social type, for he is initially the son of a wealthy Jewish merchant, a member of the social elite. According to Kelley (1987), Ben-Hur's elevated social status at the start of the novel may function, in part, as a means of gaining the reader's interest, since only five percent of central characters in novels popular in America, written by both American and non-American authors, between 1850 and 1920 (both *Ben-Hur* and *Quo Vadis?* [1896] are included in her survey) are featured in such foreign or 'exotic' settings as ancient Rome. Kelley mentions that whenever such figures in foreign settings appear in popular novels, 'they have impressive titles and/or find religion to be necessary to their lives' (49).

⁴⁹ Wallace (1906) 2.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 48.

⁵¹ Ibid, 42.

exclusively in the United States by evangelical Protestant communities who were often discouraged from reading novels apart from those written specifically for Christian devotion. Whether or not Wallace intended to write for this audience, his *Life of Christ* narrative brought him readers who reported encounters with the novel characterised by a Christian devotional experience similar to that encouraged by biblical fiction novels of the time. Consideration of the place of biblical fiction historically and culturally can stimulate understanding of *Ben-Hur*'s high degree of significance for Christian readers in the United States.

From the early decades of the nineteenth century, organisations such as the American Bible Society (1816), the American Tract Society (1825), and the American Home Missionary Society (1826) had emerged to promote Christianity in its association with American patriotism.⁵² Cultural historian David Morgan, who approaches the study of religions as 'communities of feeling or sentiment', has investigated the emphasis on the idea of sympathy in American evangelical Christianity as promoted in publications produced by these organisations, particularly the American Tract Society.⁵³ Morgan observes that within the Tract Society the idea of Christian sympathy was constructed as a 'social inflection of feeling', or a regulator for social morality, 'conducive to middle-class Protestant concepts of domestic and social order'.⁵⁴ Within this paradigm, the Tract Society encouraged American Christians to cultivate sympathy for those below them in the social order, and harshly condemned any behavior that could stir up strong emotions, and/or isolate an individual from his or her familial or religious community, such as drinking, attending the theatre, and reading novels.⁵⁵

A crucial element of the evangelical Christian model of emotional behaviour in the latter half of the nineteenth century was the promotion of Christ as an emotionally accessible, gentle companion. The idea of Christ as a 'personal saviour', and the search

⁵² Berlin (1989) 3.

⁵³ Morgan (2012) 6. For further discussions on the dynamics of religious communities as emotional communities, both within and outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition, see *Religion and Emotion* (John Corrigan, ed: 2004).

⁵⁴ Illustrations of 'the living network of sympathy between the Arab and his horse, and the Palestinian shepherd and his flocks' were included in the Family Christian Almanacs published by the American Tract Society in the latter half of the nineteenth century to provide readers with a meditation on the 'quaint' or simple aspect of sympathy with a lower, or less fortunate being (Morgan, 2012: 86-7). Wallace adopts this image of the emotional connection between Arabs and horses in his characterisation of Sheik Ilderim. While the Sheik does not appear to be as morally base as Romans, by virtue of his alliance with Ben-Hur, the Sheik exhibits moral misbehaviour corresponding to his relatively low position in the social hierarchy. The Sheik's emotions are termed 'inhuman', and he is compared to a series of animals in his incapacity to communicate emotions verbally: '[The Sheik] leaped rather than rose to his feet, his arms outstretched, his fingers spread and curved like claws, his eyes glittering like a serpent's' (*Ben-Hur*, 293).

⁵⁵ Morgan (1999a) 84.

for the humanness of the ‘historical Christ’ began to overwhelm doctrinal sub-divisions and emerge as the cornerstone of American Protestantism.⁵⁶ Baptist and Methodist churches emerged to simplify theology and render Christianity more accessible to the masses; these churches encouraged their congregations to read biblical fiction, which for the most part focused on the life of Christ and the early history of Christianity, surpassing doctrinal distinctions and unifying the experience of American Christianity grounded in biblical ‘origins’.⁵⁷

Biblical fiction enjoyed immense popularity among Christian communities, particularly from the 1850s onward, and churches performed readings of these novels in order to more effectively engage the interest of the congregation.⁵⁸ The rhetoric of biblical fiction was rooted in the tradition of revival sermons that originated in the eighteenth-century, and featured what Jackson terms ‘aesthetics of immediacy: visual language, the personalization of religious narrative, and the evocation of intense emotions...to foster readers’ identification with protagonists struggling for moral control and spiritual transcendence’.⁵⁹

Biblical fiction frequently featured conversion narratives, revolving around Jewish protagonists who encounter Christ personally. In Pogson Smith’s *Zerah, the Believing Jew* (1837), a skeptical Jew witnesses Christ’s miracles, and, as Judah Ben-Hur does, his Crucifixion. Thereupon Zerah converts to Christianity and undergoes the harsh existence of an early Christian under the oppressive might of Roman rule, such as bearing witness to the martyrdoms of Paul and Peter (although this ultimately works to strengthen Zerah’s Christian conviction, for he receives these visions in a state of ‘solemn awe’) (*Zerah, the Believing Jew*, 274).

The vital element of Ben-Hur’s conversion to Christianity echoes an element of Christian-Jewish relations in the nineteenth-century United States worth consideration. Before Reform Judaism began to garner a significant following in the 1880s, attempts to ‘Americanise’ Judaism, with the introduction of American synagogues with American rabbis, and Jewish schools, had been relatively unsuccessful. Religious services were rare, and places of worship were used mostly for social gatherings, with ‘fewer than 10

⁵⁶ Ibid, 82; Miller (2008) 154-155. Berlin (1989: 48) observes that some groups of Protestant intellectuals in the United States in the nineteenth century were disinclined to use the New Testament to understand the ‘historical Christ’s, because its composition developed substantially later than the events it documented.

⁵⁷ Reynolds (1981) 2.

⁵⁸ Gutjahr (2004) 90-91. The similar function of *Ben-Hur* (1880) within churches (see Chapter 2, Section 4) demonstrates Christian communities’ willingness to allow Wallace’s novel to take the place of biblical fiction in a worship context.

⁵⁹ Jackson (2011) 169.

percent of American Jews...so much as affiliated with congregations'.⁶⁰ This relative weakness in religious fervour among the Jewish community was recognised by heads of Protestant denominations, some of whom made appeals to the Jews to convert to Christianity expressing a concern about the Jewish cultivation of religious feeling:

It is a fearful sign of prevailing degeneracy in the synagogue, when the Scriptures and prayers are read in an ancient language, and the words are not understood, and those who read without understanding think that they have been really worshipping. We hold to the principle, as of vital importance, that there is no true worship of God in any instance where the understanding is not enlightened, and where the heart is not affected with the truth.⁶¹

This idea that using an 'ancient language' in worship bars understanding of the holy text, and thus bars the ability for emotional experience of worship is interesting to compare to Wallace's introduction of Ben-Hur's mother into his narrative: 'She spoke in the language almost lost in the land, but which a few—and they were always as rich in blood as in possessions—cherished in its purity, that they might be more certainly distinguished from Gentile peoples...' (*Ben-Hur*, 93). Wallace chooses to associate Hebrew with the status of Jews as an ethnic minority (the racial element was observed in Wallace's physical description of Ben-Hur), one associated with material wealth, and one which chooses to socially distinguish itself from the 'Gentile peoples'. This idea of communication in Hebrew as both an agent of social exclusion and, from the perspective of the Synod above, not only an unsatisfactory means of worship, but also a 'fearful' practice, is an important issue to consider in light of the American interest in the conversion of Jews to Christianity.

Within the model of biblical fiction an effort is sustained to preserve consistency with the Bible in Christ's appearances: 'a fictional eyewitness...can be created with due propriety, but the author is careful not to revise Christ's words or to invent new miracles to make a point'.⁶² Wallace likewise maintains respect for the sanctity of Christ's words, which are unaltered in *Ben-Hur*. In addition to retaining the reverential interest of those familiar with the Life of Christ narratives in the Gospels, emphasis on the unaltered words of Christ in these narratives invited those who did not read the Bible to cultivate a personal relationship with Christ.⁶³ Christ's life is then witnessed from the perspective of a fictional protagonist, who is written into the biblical context. Wallace

⁶⁰ Sachar (1992) 113.

⁶¹ Taken from 'An Appeal to the Jews to Convert', an address made to the Jewish residents of New York by the New York Synod of the Presbyterian Church, October 1849 (reproduced in Berlin, 1989: 101).

⁶² Reynolds (1981) 136. Other novels that feature a Jew's process of conversion to Christianity, specifically through direct encounters with Christ, include James Freeman Clarke's *The Legend of Thomas Didymus: The Jewish Sceptic* (1881), and Caroline Atwater Mason's *The Quiet King: A Story of Christ* (1896).

⁶³ See the preface of Pogson Smith's *Zerah the Believing Jew* (1837: 3).

conforms to both elements of the biblical fiction model highlighted above, by incorporating Christ's quotations directly from the Bible and by writing Judah Ben-Hur into the Bible as the young man who flees the Garden of Gethsemane after Christ's betrayal by Judas (*Ben-Hur*, 494; Mark 14: 51-52).

The strict adherence in biblical fiction to quotations attributed to Christ in the New Testament provided these works with a safeguard against potential accusations of blasphemy from established Protestant churches during a time when the Americanisation of Christ in emerging fringe religious movements such as Mormonism and Christian Science was under serious attack. By the time Lew Wallace was writing *Ben-Hur*, fear of Mormonism, particularly the practice of polygamy, was rising, to culminate in the outlawing of polygamy in the Edmunds Act of 1882, and the disincorporation of the Church of the Latter-Day Saints in 1887.⁶⁴ Catholics were also heavily criticised by evangelical Protestant publications, particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century, on three major bases: that Catholicism was not in fact Christianity, but idolatry; that 'Popery' was the antithesis of American democratic institutions, and was, by contrast, tyrannical; and that the moral standards of the Catholic Church were dangerous to the Protestant, and thus American, value systems.⁶⁵ In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church's attempts to 'Americanise' and to promote ideals of democracy and domestic values similar to those promulgated by the Protestant churches and organisations won for Catholics a higher degree of tolerance from, and even acceptance into the Protestant American socio-economic climate, particularly in urban areas.⁶⁶ These tensions between alternative definitions of an 'American' Christianity, and the mainstream evangelical Protestant definition, are noteworthy.

The perceptions, attitudes, and changes in play that affected relationships between Protestant and Jewish Americans may have influenced Wallace's characterisation of Judah Ben-Hur, and the author's decision to provide a conversion narrative from the point of view of an originally Jewish protagonist. A Jewish protagonist who converts to Christianity through an immediate encounter with Christ is also a standard feature of American biblical fiction, and reinforces the function of the biblical fiction novel as an agent of Protestant evangelism. Ideas of Judaism in the

⁶⁴ Jenkins (2000) 37.

⁶⁵ Billington (1964) 351.

⁶⁶ Dolan (2002) 72-3. On the other hand, this Americanisation of Catholicism incurred Pope Leo XIII's disfavour. In 1899 the Pope formally denounced what he termed 'Americanism' in the *Testem Benevolentiae*, objecting to the idea of Catholicism acting alongside the belief in the separation of church and state (Ibid, 107-108).

United States, constructed primarily from the perspective of the Protestant majority, were fraught with conflicting messages at the end of the nineteenth century: the alignment of Americans with the people of Israel; the circulating suspicion of the perceived exclusivity of Jewish business undertakings; and the movement to extend Protestantism to Jews and thus initiate them more fully into American society. All three of these major conceptions are to some extent represented in Wallace's novel through the portrayal of Judah Ben-Hur and his family, in a way recognisable to readers. A writer for the *Saturday Review* in Indianapolis terms Ben Hur 'a noble Jew, the very highest type of men which the world without Christ could see or recognize...[this] was essential to the exhibition of the best fruit of the Jewish religion'.⁶⁷

It is readily appreciable that Wallace incorporated narrative devices used by his successful predecessors in the Anglo-American historical novel tradition, and features in sympathy with American biblical fiction, in order to appeal to a wide range of potential readers. With the merging of these two approaches, Wallace invited readers in the United States with evolving social, political, and religious beliefs, and differing perspectives on the United States' relationship to Rome, Judaism, and Christianity, to engage with his novel on a number of levels.

1.3. EMOTIONS IN *BEN-HUR: A TALE OF THE CHRIST* (1880)

Wallace's professed intention to 'show the religious and political condition of the world at the time of the coming'⁶⁸ indicates his concern with ethnography. Since Wallace's sources for the historical and environmental features of Judaea are not readily accessible, an understanding of his models for characterising the inhabitants of Judaea, and their cultural, political, and religious attitudes, is difficult to develop. It is, however, possible to analyse the peoples of Wallace's Judaea, represented by those involved in the central narrative, with respect to the invitations they offer for readers' emotional engagement. The author's brief reflection on his own means of structuring a narrative around the interactions between Romans, Jews, and Christians provides a useful starting point for this approach to analysis of the text: 'The commitment to the galley, the sea-fight, the chariot-race and its preceding orgies were the Roman phases; just as the *love* marking the Hur family, the steady pursuit of *vengeance* by the son, and his easy

⁶⁷ 'Ben-Hur'. (27 December 1880). *Saturday Review* (Indianapolis, IN), Papers of Susan and Lew Wallace, IHS.

⁶⁸ Wallace (1906) 931.

conversion by Simonides to the *alluring* idea of the Messiah ruler like Caesar, were Jewish’⁶⁹ (italics mine).

Within Wallace’s statement there emerges a distinction between Romans and Jews in these ethnographic ‘phases’ of the narrative; one interesting element of this distinction is the plurality of ‘emotion’ words in Wallace’s description of the ‘Jewish’ phase, and the lack of emotions in his description of the ‘Roman’ phase. Another noteworthy element is the individualism, the specificity of character Wallace highlights in his description of the ‘Jewish’ phase that is absent in the ‘Roman’ phase, which is instead qualified by a specificity of scenes. It is possible thus to observe Wallace’s use of strategies for inviting readers’ emotional engagement with characters inhabiting the Roman, Jewish, or ultimately Christian phases of *Ben-Hur*. Wallace is careful to establish ‘emotionologies’,⁷⁰ or standards of emotional behaviour under which members of these groups operate, in order to guide readers’ emotional engagement with his narrative.

Robert and Katharine Morsberger have observed Wallace’s hierarchical arrangement of Romans, Jews, and Christians in *Ben-Hur* on the basis of morality: ‘Christianity is presented in the novel as a higher stage... Though Christianity is shown as the fulfillment of [Jewish law], Judaism is respected throughout the novel. And when Ben-Hur bests Messala, it is not just the victory of hero over villain but of Jew over Roman’.⁷¹ As the following analysis will show, Wallace continuously negotiates relationships within this hierarchy by manipulating, or even fabricating, ancient emotionologies. Since the definition of ‘emotionology’ involves collective standards of basic emotions and their appropriate (or inappropriate) expression, the method of investigating Wallace’s construction of emotionologies in this chapter will involve the following focal aspects: specific emotions regularly exhibited by members of a particular group; the conscious thought systems in place for manifesting emotions; and the perspective of the emotionology of one group on the emotionology of another.

Central questions for analysis will consequently involve the means by which Wallace establishes this hierarchy. How is emotionology manipulated to invite readers to engage with some groups more than others? Are some of the emotionologies designed to be more foreign or more familiar than others? How might these

⁶⁹ Ibid, 931-932.

⁷⁰ ‘Emotionology’, a term derived from studies in history of emotions, is defined as ‘the attitudes or standards that a society, or a definable group within a society, maintains toward basic emotions and their appropriate expression; ways that institutions reflect and encourage these attitudes in human conduct’ (Stearns and Stearns, 1985: 813).

⁷¹ Morsberger and Morsberger (1980) 451.

reconstructions of ancient emotionologies relate to moral systems? How is the emotionological hierarchy related to the social hierarchy? Since Wallace's context for his narrative is 'the time of the coming', special attention will be given to the ways in which Wallace's Roman, Jewish, and proto-Christian emotionologies (including the characterisation of the figure of Christ) operate in the context of religiosity.

Roman indifference and the legacy of virtue

At the reader's initial encounter with Messala, the first representative of Rome thoroughly drawn in *Ben-Hur*, Wallace reveals his three strategies (consistent throughout his novel) for constructing an emotionological hierarchy of Romans, Christians, and Jews. All of these techniques juxtapose the emotionologies of the three groups, by means of interactions among the members of the groups.

The first of these strategies emphasises an inverted relationship between emotionological hierarchy and socio-political hierarchy. Messala is introduced as Ben-Hur's childhood friend who has recently been sent by Augustus from Rome to Jerusalem to support the new procurator Gratus' command in Jerusalem by levying taxes in the region.⁷² The image of Messala's clothing, stature, speech, and facial features (*Ben-Hur*, 80-1)⁷³ communicates an initial sense of Messala's social and racial superiority to Ben-Hur. Wallace's commentary on the Roman ideological complexes, however, betrays the author's intention to characterise Romans as 'other', adhering to a primitive worldview featuring a lack of religious feeling:

Reverence as a quality of the Roman mind was fast breaking down... The old religion had nearly ceased to be a faith... As philosophy was taking the place of religion, satire was fast substituting reverence... Messala... had caught the habit and manner... a languid utterance affected as the best vehicle to convey the idea of general indifference (*Ben-Hur*, 82).

This quotation introduces Wallace's second strategy for the construction of an emotionological hierarchy: the emphasis on the relationship between emotions and religion, and emotions and moral determination, as features that distinguish Roman,

⁷² Messala is identified as the son of a Messala who at first had been 'a friend of Brutus', 'yet later, when Octavius disputed for the Empire, Messala supported him' (*Ben-Hur*, 80). Mayer (1998: 524) has noted the accuracy of this 'historic ancestry' for the fictional Messala the son and antagonist in Wallace's narrative.

⁷³ This is similar to the racial characterisation of Ben-Hur observed earlier in this chapter. The definition of Messala's 'high and narrow' forehead (notably contrasted with Ben-Hur's 'low and broad' one), his 'sharp and aquiline' nose, and his 'cold and close' eyes may reveal in addition to the author's interest in racial distinctions, an interest in phrenology, or the association of cranial features with character traits. Morgan (1999b: 275) observes that phrenology, which had become popular in the United States beginning in the 1830s, influenced the shift toward portraiture, and an increased association between facial expression and character traits, in American visual culture in secular and religious contexts.

Jewish, and Christian emotionologies from one another.⁷⁴ In the above passage, Wallace addresses the reader directly, suggesting the ‘otherness’ and relatively primitive status of the Roman emotionology. The expression of ‘general indifference’ is integral to Roman emotionology, and according to Wallace, has directly resulted from a decline in religious feeling, or reverence. This indifference is in turn presented as a result of the Romans’ turn to philosophy at the expense of the faith associated with the old Roman religion. This sense of backwardness, a lack of reverence against which faith in the pagan religion is appraised as closer to the sensibilities of readers of *Ben-Hur*, is revealing; here emerges Wallace’s concern with the establishment of a hierarchy of feelings associated with religious experience, and the attribution of that hierarchy to ethno-religious groups in *Ben-Hur*.

In the dialogue between Ben-Hur and Messala, which ends inevitably in their falling out, Messala shares his attitude toward the expression of emotions, as dictated by his new philosophical models. Messala is preoccupied with war, he invokes the Roman gods as a justification for making war,⁷⁵ and he names the practice of Judaism as the cause of the alleged military and political inferiority of the Jews to the Romans.⁷⁶ Messala invokes the names of the Roman gods, for whom he presumably carries no faith, when he magnifies the superiority of Rome. He challenges the socio-political pragmatism of Jewish faith in God when he asks, ‘Satisfied with the worship of such a people, what is your God to our Roman Jove, who lends us his eagles that we may encompass the world with our arms?’ (84)

In his initial dialogue with Ben-Hur, Messala continues to promote an association of war with the supremacy of Rome, defined in part by its superiority to love, which Messala identifies with his and Ben-Hur’s childhood friendship. This idea is underscored in Messala’s declaration of ‘Eros is dead, Mars reigns!’ at the point of the friends’ falling out (88).⁷⁷ Before this point Messala validates the belief that war is meant to supplant love. He cites this idea as originating from his ‘teacher’ in Rome,

⁷⁴ Wallace constructs an emotionological hierarchy through the inversion of the social hierarchy; this combined with his second strategy, an emphasis on the relationship between emotions and religion, he employs with a view to render the ‘most reverent’ as inhabiting the highest place within his emotionological hierarchy and the lowest place on the social hierarchy. Since *Ben-Hur* is a tale of conversion, Wallace’s hierarchy resonates with Christ’s statement, ‘Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth’ (Matthew 5:5).

⁷⁵ Although, since Wallace has indicated the absence of genuine reverence from Romans, readers are encouraged to see this as a rhetorical technique, a manifestation of Wallace’s claim later in his novel that ‘in Rome nothing was so common and cheap as gods. According to whim, the masters of the world...carried their worship and offerings indifferently from altar to altar’ (252).

⁷⁶ Thus Wallace again implements his first strategy for the construction of an emotionological hierarchy. When Messala claims his social and political superiority, Wallace is setting the stage for Ben-Hur to emerge as belonging to a more elevated emotionological group.

⁷⁷ Messala reprises this quotation when he condemns Ben-Hur to the galleys (116).

from an unspecified philosophical school: 'Love is nothing, war everything. It is so in Rome... Virtue is a tradesman's jewel. Cleopatra, dying, bequeathed her arts, and is avenged; she has a successor in every Roman's house.' (84-85).⁷⁸

This manner of Messala's seemingly arbitrary appeal to philosophy is echoed further on, at a critical point in the narrative. When Messala accuses Ben-Hur of attempting to assassinate the Roman procurator, a legionnaire protests on the grounds that 'he is but a boy'. Messala responds, 'What would Seneca say to the proposition that a man but be old before he can hate enough to kill?' (116). Wallace's decision to leave out any further explanation of Messala's invocation of Seneca is another indication of the foreignness of the Roman emotionology, creating an association between moral decision-making and arbitrary philosophical solicitations.

Thus far two of Wallace's three strategies for the construction of an ethnographic hierarchy in *Ben-Hur* have emerged: the inversion of political and social superiority and emotionological superiority, and the fundamental distinction between different emotionological groups in the hierarchy on the basis of the relationship between religion and emotion, and emotion and moral determination. In the initial dialogue between Messala and Ben-Hur, Wallace provides Ben-Hur's emotionological background as a contrast to Messala's, and implements his final strategy for arranging his hierarchy: providing access for the reader to the emotional experience of a member of the group the author intends to elevate. Wallace provides this affective response for Ben-Hur to Messala's haughty indifference and lack of reverence:

[Ben-Hur]...belonged to a race whose laws, modes, and habits of thought forbade satire and humour; very naturally, therefore, he listened to his friend with varying feelings; one moment indignant, then uncertain how to take him. The superior airs assumed had been offensive to him in the beginning; soon they became irritating, and at last an acute smart. Anger lies close by this point in all of us... To the Jew of the Herodian period patriotism was a savage passion scarcely hidden under his common humour, and so related to his history, religion, and God that it responded instantly to derision of them (*Ben-Hur*, 85).

In this passage Wallace grants his reader access to Ben-Hur's emotional experience, and invites the reader's sympathy on the basis of the universality of experience, initially aligning his characterisation of Ben-Hur with Scott's 'necessary anachronism'. The degree of Ben-Hur's emotional similarity to the reader appears in stark contrast to the lack of access the reader is permitted into Messala's experience. Yet, Wallace then

⁷⁸ This reference to Cleopatra's 'successor in every Roman's house' anticipates the entrance of Egyptian Iras into the narrative. Iras provides temptation for Ben-Hur, after he meets her in Antioch, following his adoption by his former master Quintus Arrius. While Iras frequently indicates a growing affection for Ben-Hur, further on in the narrative she is revealed to be Messala's loyal mistress and spy. Thus, she herself emerges as a 'successor' of Cleopatra, an agent of art and entrapment, under Messala's control.

undermines the potential for his reader's sympathy to lie unconditionally with Ben-Hur with his differentiation of Ben-Hur's emotionological approach as strictly belonging to his 'race...whose laws...forbade satire and humour'. Wallace determines Ben-Hur's emotionological compass not only by his race, but by his historical setting, attributing the 'savage passion' of patriotism to Ben-Hur's socio-political background. Thus, Wallace invites his readers to appraise Ben-Hur as belonging to a more advanced emotionological system than Messala, by specifying that the standards of behaviour and morality that govern Ben-Hur's outlook are adopted from his Jewish conception of God, while the structure of Messala's emotionology consists of seemingly arbitrary appeals to varied (and sometimes unnamed) philosophical schools, combined with faithless invocations of Roman gods. Still, Wallace attributes a baseness to the emotionology governing Ben-Hur's behaviour, when he names Ben-Hur's feeling of patriotism a 'savage passion'.

Romans in *Ben-Hur* also exhibit the nineteenth-century American ambivalence toward Rome, embodied in popular associations with Imperial and Republican Rome. In Wallace's novel, ideologically Republican Romans and ideologically Imperial Romans operate under distinct emotionologies with respect to religious and moral determination. Quintus Arrius, Roman tribune and commander of a warship on which Ben-Hur rows as a galley slave, represents *virtus* associated with the Roman Republic. Arrius saves Ben-Hur from slavery and adopts him as his son after he is rescued by Ben-Hur in the wake of a dreadful sea battle that has wrecked their ship. While Ben-Hur is still a slave, Arrius sends for him, since he finds it curious that a Jew, 'not a barbarian', is enslaved as a rower (136). Arrius is even more astonished to hear that Ben-Hur is the son of 'Hur, a prince of Jerusalem...a merchant...honoured in the guest-chamber of the great Augustus' (137). Arrius finds Ben-Hur's story about Messala's betrayal, the unknown whereabouts of his family, the dispossession of his property, and Ben-Hur's own fate as a slave delivered to the galleys without a trial so convincing that he wishes to place his trust in the integrity of this young man's story. (He later does, as he orders Ben-Hur not to be chained to his rowing seat when they prepare for battle).

Wallace chooses to cast Arrius as the 'good tribune' whose standards of emotional behaviour, unlike Messala's, are guided by a morality Wallace associates with genuine reverence for the Roman gods.⁷⁹ Arrius also believes in the justice of the

⁷⁹ Arrius is first introduced in the narrative when he thanks Fortune 'earnestly' for the favourable wind (124) and offers 'solemn prayers to Jove and to Neptune and all the Oceanidae, and, with vows, poured the wine and burned the incense' (130).

state, and imagines the process by which Ben-Hur had been condemned: ‘...with what blind fury the power had been exercised! A whole family blotted out to atone an accident! The thought shocked him...to excite his sense of wrong was to put him in the way to right the wrong’ (139). Wallace pointedly exalts Arrius, placing his Republican sensibilities above Messala’s corrupt and apathetic adherence to a disintegrating set of standards of emotional behaviour. Wallace also invites his reader to engage with Arrius personally, through the provision of access into internal cognitive and emotional processes.

Although Arrius is a symbol of the Republic, a way for American readers to remember the model of civic duty, liberty, and democracy which the United States assumed at its birth, Wallace places him unequivocally in an emotionological group below Ben-Hur’s. For Arrius, the strength of Rome lies in the honour of its citizens. Thus, when he and Ben-Hur are holding onto a scrap of wood from the wrecked ship, contemplating the outcome of the battle, Arrius declares that he would rather die than submit to dishonour and live if the Romans have lost. For Arrius, there is emotional pain, an unbearable sense of shame that accompanies a betrayal of the values of justice and honour, in which he holds strong conviction. Arrius is what remains of the old Roman *virtus* admired and emulated by the American revolutionaries. This idea of self-sacrifice in defence of the ideals of the Roman Republic is reminiscent of the noble Roman suicide celebrated in American portrayals of Republican Rome since the success of Joseph Addison’s play *Cato* (1713), which enjoyed immense popularity throughout the eighteenth century, and provided a model of inspiration for the revolutionary spirit of the 1770s.⁸⁰ However, in this scene in the novel, Arrius is redeemed from his assumption of Cato’s fate, by virtue of the intervention of Ben-Hur, whose emotionological system of moral determination, derived from the Jewish God, prevents him from letting Arrius die: ‘The Law, which is to me most binding, O tribune, would make me answerable for thy life’ (156-7.). Luckily for the two men, the Romans did prevail in the battle, a development that resolves this ideological conflict, although again Wallace renders the socially inferior of the two, the slave Ben-Hur, the superior within the framework of his emotionological hierarchy.

Iras and Esther: models of the feminine

Iras, the daughter of Egyptian Balthasar (one of the Magi present at the Nativity in the beginning of the novel) and secret mistress of Messala, is an intriguing, seductive

⁸⁰ Malamud (2009) 9-11.

woman who toys with Ben-Hur's affections throughout the novel, and occupies an interesting place within Wallace's emotionological scheme. She is the embodiment of 'Cleopatra's successor', an agent of entrapment, an Egyptian who pursues a hidden relationship with a Roman. In fact, Wallace qualifies Iras as even more dangerous for Ben-Hur than Cleopatra was to Antony: 'By such play Antony was weaned from his glory; yet she who wrought his ruin was really not half so beautiful as this her countrywoman' (426). Wallace renders her emotionally impenetrable to his reader; her psychological inscrutability complements her physical allure, to which Wallace pays particular attention in his initial description of her (203).⁸¹ Where Iras is emotionally unreachable for the reader, Ben-Hur's impressions of her are ubiquitous in the text: 'If love and Ben-Hur were enemies, the latter was never more at mercy...' (279); 'The desire to be agreeable to her was a constant impulse' (425). Wallace's strategy of guiding his reader through Ben-Hur's experience of temptation from his intimate perspective encourages the reader to perceive Iras as the 'other', even if she by virtue of her enigmatic and erotic nature does become an object of appeal for the reader and for Ben-Hur.⁸²

Iras' emotionological compass is similar in several ways to the one Wallace constructs for Messala. She, like Messala, rejects the idea of love's benevolence in her delivery of an Egyptian fable whose moral Iras reveals to be 'the only cure for love is death' (284-5).⁸³ Iras' relationship to religious experience features a dismissal of her father Balthasar's ardent faith in the Christian God as demonstrative of a lack of wisdom borne from old age. Iras provides philosophy as an alternative to religion, a belief Wallace initially indicated as Roman (427). Wallace's final revelation of Iras as an insidious influence, a danger to the morality of the higher realms of emotionological

⁸¹ Iras comes to insist that Ben-Hur call her 'Egypt', which she describes vividly and sensually as the centre of everything natural, cerebral, philosophical, and commercial, as if she is leading Ben-Hur through the streets of Alexandria. This interest in the decadence of Orientalism, embodied in Iras, is also featured in Bulwer-Lytton's characterisation of Egyptian Arbaces in the *Last Days of Pompeii*. The interest in oriental decadence is also evidenced in the French tradition of the historical novel, in Gustav Flaubert's characterisation of Carthage in *Salammbô* (1865). O'Gorman (2004: 608) has observed that Flaubert's descriptions of Carthaginian decadence serve to alienate his nineteenth-century reader from the civilization he is portraying, by emphasising the remoteness and cultural inaccessibility of antiquity. Wallace may be employing this technique in his characterisation of Iras to signal her foreignness to his readers, discouraging them from developing a sympathetic relationship with her.

⁸² Mayer (forthcoming, 10-11) acknowledges the complexity of Iras' character Wallace constructs in the novel, and convincingly demonstrates the qualities of independence, intelligence, glamour, and danger that render her a markedly well-rounded female character in comparison with Esther, Tirzah, or Ben-Hur's mother.

⁸³ Interestingly, Iras precedes her tale with a kind of validation of its authenticity, accompanied by an appeal to treat the source with reverence: 'Listen reverently. The papyrus from which it was taken by the priests of Philae was wrested from the hand of the heroine herself' (284). This idea of the origin of the text as part of the story itself is interesting to consider when compared to Wallace's conscious validation of authenticity within the text (the Catacombs of San Calixto as a testament to Ben-Hur's charity).

persuasion, combined with his comparison of her to Cleopatra in the threat her charms pose to virtuous men, even virtuous Romans, indicates his placement of her as below even Messala in his hierarchy of emotionology. Indeed, receivers of the text were led by the example of Iras in Wallace's narrative to believe that Rome's corruption had actually originated in Eastern decadence.⁸⁴

Yet in the epilogue, 'The Catacomb', the reader beholds Iras' recognition of the moral decay inherent in her relationship with Messala. She visits the Hur villa near Misenum and announces to Esther that she has murdered Messala. Iras denies Esther's offer of Christian friendship and, with an ominous statement—'I am what I am of choice. It will be over shortly'—, departs, presumably to commit suicide (518).⁸⁵ In this episode, Iras has abandoned her haughty attitude and cunning wit. She is a wretch, with no family or community, denying the possibility of spiritual salvation. Her facial expression is inscrutable, her lines of dialogue ambiguous in meaning. The reader is invited to cultivate (Christian) sympathy for Iras, as Esther demonstrates, but (again) is barred access to the thoughts and feelings of the woman who has consciously refused Christian conversion and chosen to die with her sins unforgiven.

Throughout the novel Iras attempts to lure Ben-Hur away from his process of conversion to Christianity and toward a dangerous condemnation of religiosity. Wallace regularly juxtaposes her with the character of Esther, daughter of the Hur family's former slave, Simonides, and guide for Ben-Hur toward his defining encounter with Christ at the Crucifixion, the point of his conversion. After Ben-Hur discovers Iras' duplicity, he reflects on the guiding force of each of these women, his potential love interests, toward his assumption, or rejection, of Christianity: 'There it is all vanity, here all truth; there ambition, here duty; there selfishness, here self-sacrifice' (488).

Jerome de Groot places *Ben-Hur* in the category of adventure-oriented historical novels made for men to encounter 'exemplars for male behaviour in...situations' involving war and other conflict. However, he does not recognise the important exempla (both positive and negative) the novel, particularly in its capacity as a 'Tale of the Christ', offers for women as potential keepers, or suppressors, of religious faith in the family (including marital partnerships).⁸⁶ Iras provides the erotically appealing, yet mendacious, counterpoint to Esther, who projects an image of 'truth...duty....self-sacrifice' that helps to lead Ben-Hur to his experience of Christian conversion. The

⁸⁴ Letter from Paul Hamilton Hayne to Lew Wallace (reproduced in Wallace, 1906: 948).

⁸⁵ Mayer (forthcoming, 14) reads Wallace's reference to the 'dark secrets' of the Bay of Misenum as an indication that Iras drowned herself there.

⁸⁶ De Groot (210) 78, 85.

positive portrayal of women as conveyors of religious conviction embodied in Esther and, as will become evident shortly, Ben-Hur's mother, invite female readers of *Ben-Hur* to engage with the narrative, and consider themselves as important agents of spiritual well being within their familial and religious communities. The idea of the woman as the spiritual anchor for the family reinforced the 'middle-class domestic ideology' that circulated in the nineteenth-century United States and united Protestants and Catholics under the assumption that the woman was 'mother and moral guardian of the family'.⁸⁷

Wallace's characterisation of Esther as drawing Ben-Hur toward his moment of conversion anticipates Polish author Henryk Sienkiewicz's design of his pagan (Roman) protagonist Marcus Vinicius' conversion to Christianity in *Quo Vadis?* (1896).

Sienkiewicz's novel describes the plight of Christians living in Rome under Nero, and more specifically provides a similar 'origin narrative' to that of *Ben-Hur*, namely the birth of the Catholic Church under the leadership of Saint Peter and Saint Paul.⁸⁸ The gradual process of Vinicius' conversion to Christianity is motivated by his desire for Christian Lygia. In his pursuit of Lygia, Vinicius encounters Saint Peter's delivery of a sermon in a cemetery, and at first is highly skeptical and hears Peter's words 'through the medium of his love for Lygia...If Lygia was in the cemetery, if she confessed that religion...she never could and never would be his mistress' (*Quo Vadis?*, 168). Despite his initial resistance to the sermon, Vinicius experiences 'something wonderful...as if he were dreaming' enter his mind as he hears Peter's account of Christ's Resurrection. Only after he enters this altered state of consciousness, which begins to dissolve his former criticisms of Christian teachings, does Vinicius actually find Lygia (170-171).⁸⁹ Vinicius eventually acknowledges Lygia's crucial role in his conversion to Christianity when he asks her to witness his baptism (300).

⁸⁷ Dolan (2002) 88, 124.

⁸⁸ Scodel and Bettenworth (2009: 185-186) argue that Catholic liturgical and theological specificity is not granted very much attention in *Quo Vadis?*, despite the novel's original publication in newspapers throughout mostly Catholic Poland: 'The only significant religious ritual is baptism....Apart from that, religious customs remain unspecific....The novel focuses on prayers, hymns, and sermons while the central rite of breaking the bread is left out'. According to Guzik (2008: 5), a possible source of Catholic appeal in *Quo Vadis?* could have been the prayers and sermons themselves, which, combined with the narrative of Vinicius' cognitive and emotional experience of them, resonate with elements of the Ignatian *Spiritual Exercises*. The *Spiritual Exercises* emphasise an internal process of meditation and contemplation that fosters a 'strengthening of the soul'.

⁸⁹ The idea of the dream-state as a space for religious epiphany in Vinicius' experience recurs in *Quo Vadis?* (206) when Vinicius, in the throes of fever, dreams of Lygia as a Christian priestess atop a tower in a cemetery. This underscores her place in Sienkiewicz's narrative as a leader for Vinicius into Christian faith (although in the context of this dream Vinicius still struggles to reconcile his love for her with her Christian identity).

The strategy employed by Wallace (and Sienkiewicz) to create female characters who inspire the male protagonist to embrace Christianity suggests to female readers their responsibility to serve the social function of ‘moral guardian’ for their families or broader communities. This element emerges within both *Ben-Hur* and *Quo Vadis?* as an essential feature of male conversion experiences within the ‘origin of Christianity’ narrative, a feature that seems to transcend denominational and national distinctions.

Jewish emotionology: familial affection, vengeance, and the Law

Wallace’s three major strategies for construction of an emotionological hierarchy (inversion of social hierarchy and emotionological hierarchy; the distinction between hierarchies characterised by the relationship between religion and emotion, and emotion and moral determination; and the level of access Wallace offers his reader to the psychological experience of members of a given emotionological group), emerge once again in the author’s construction of Jewish emotionology.

Wallace employs the familial love ubiquitously exhibited among the members of the Jewish community in the novel (Ben-Hur, his mother and sister, the family’s abidingly loyal and genuinely caring slave Amrah, Simonides, and his daughter Esther) to elevate Jewish emotionology above that of Messala, to whom love is inconsequential, or even repellant. Familial love for the mother, and the qualities of ‘mother-love’ (the Jewish mother’s love for her family) are highly emphasised, to the point at which Wallace abandons his third-person narrative mode and directly solicits his readers to sympathise. Jewish familial love in *Ben-Hur* is defined, in part, by the central importance of the preservation of genealogical records to the survival of the religious community, and to Mosaic Law. Ben-Hur’s mother testifies to this when she narrates the magnificent lineage of the Jewish people to her son. During her narrative she encourages Ben-Hur to visualise them as members of a grand procession: ‘Now they come, the patriarchs first; next the fathers of the tribes...An old man...He knew the Lord face to face! Warrior, poet, orator, lawgiver prophet, his greatness is as the sun at morning...quenching all other lights, even that of the first and noblest of the Caesars...’ (105-106).⁹⁰

This catalogue of Jewish heritage serves multiple functions in Wallace’s construction of Jewish emotionology. Firstly, it reaffirms Wallace’s initial rendering of Jewish standards of emotional behaviour and morality as dictated by a racially distinct

⁹⁰ This visual, sensory means of heightening the emotional experience of faith, here used by Ben-Hur’s mother, is reminiscent of Christian revival sermons dating back to the eighteenth century, as described in Jackson (2011: 179).

religious tradition. Secondly, it establishes an important relationship between family/lineage and religious community. Thirdly, it emphasises the idea of Mosaic Law as sacred, through the mother's reminder to her son to reflect on Moses' receiving the Law directly from God, and applying its statutes on earth. This observation will figure in further developments of the Jewish emotionological paradigm.

Lastly, Wallace may be employing this narrative of origins of Judaism as a parallel to his own purpose in producing *Ben-Hur* as a *Tale of the Christ*. In the passage above, Ben-Hur's mother appeals to a much earlier vision of antiquity within Wallace's antiquity to strengthen her son's pride in his Jewish identity, and his faith in the power of God on earth.⁹¹ Wallace himself is similarly communicating the spiritual triumph of Christianity by guiding his reader back to the time of Christ, and tracing the origins of Christianity, perhaps to diminish the doctrinal debates among his American readers, and to align them in a vision of the potentiality of American ideological wholeness, founded in a 'fundamental' version of Christianity.

The element of 'mother-love' in Jewish emotionology, and the role of the mother as comforter (even preacher, as seen in the above passage) undergoes an evolution as the narrative progresses, as Wallace invites readers to engage with Ben-Hur's mother more personally. Wallace reveals to the reader that Messala condemned the Hur family to a cell containing leprosy when he sent Ben-Hur to the galleys. Wallace guides the reader inside the cell ('let us go down and see them as they are'), and appeals to the reader's sympathy and ability to 'share [the mother's] agony of mind and spirit' in her physical and emotional suffering (373-4). Wallace increases the psychological intimacy between the Hur family and the reader, at the same time as he narrates the family's social demotion to a level below that of Ben-Hur's slavery, to the level of death according to Mosaic Law: '...to be a leper was to be treated as dead—to be excluded from the city as a corpse...to be utterly unprivileged; to be denied the rites of the Temple and the synagogue...to be at all times less a living offence to others than a breathing torment to self; afraid to die, yet without hope except in death' (377-8). Wallace creates a tension within his paradigm of Jewish emotionology after he elevates it above the Roman model. Behaviour under Mosaic Law necessitates an instance of self-sacrifice undergone by the Hur family similar to that Arrius was prepared to experience in accordance with the limitations of his emotionological paradigm. Although Ben-Hur's obligation under the Law was to save Arrius from suicide, in the

⁹¹ The image of Moses as fulfilling secular roles of lawgiver, warrior, and orator anticipates Ben-Hur's initial ideal of the Messiah as a 'King of the Jews' destined to be an agent of social and political change (250).

following scenario the same Law condemns the family to a fate similar to that from which it saved Arrius.

After Ben-Hur's mother and sister are freed from the prison, they visit their old home on their journey to the valley of the lepers. They happen to see Ben-Hur sleeping on the front step of their home; he has returned to Jerusalem from Antioch to look for his family, and to support the coming of the Messiah. The reader is introduced to the iconic and revered 'mother-love', characterised by 'patience', 'tenderness', and 'self-sacrifice', when the mother recognises her son, but cannot touch him, barred as she is by the Jewish emotionological complex that interprets leprosy as death:

O reader!—her mother-love...hath this unlikeness to any other love: tender to the object, it can be infinitely tyrannical to itself, and thence all its power of self-sacrifice....Not for any blessing of life itself, would she have left her leprous kiss upon his cheek!...How bitter, bitter hard it was, let some other mother say! (*Ben-Hur*, 390).

Here again Wallace employs Walter Scott's 'necessary anachronism' to attribute this 'mother-love' to all mothers, exalting the nobility to which all mothers can aspire. However, Wallace is careful to indicate that the manifestations of it in this instance are by nature distinctly Jewish. The necessity for emotional suffering and self-sacrifice comes from the dictates of the Law, whose placement on the emotionological scale, as demonstrated by Ben-Hur's use of the Law to justify his revenge on Messala, Wallace prepares to be superseded by that of Christianity.

After Messala initially condemns Ben-Hur to the galleys, and his family to the prison, Ben-Hur commits himself to revenge against Messala, and claims his divine right to vengeance by the statutes of the Law. Wallace frequently associates Ben-Hur's invocations of God's will for vengeance⁹² with Ben-Hur's belief in a Messiah who will overthrow the oppressive Romans and rule a just and peaceful kingdom of Jews on earth (250). Wallace attributes specific emotions to Ben-Hur in his desire for revenge as fulfillment of the Law in combination with what Wallace terms the Jewish interpretation of the Messiah's function. These emotions set the stage for a change (an elevation) in Ben-Hur's emotionological outlook when he encounters the Christian interpretation of the Messiah, and ultimately converts to Christianity. Malluch, servant of Simonides (former slave of the Hur family and wealthy merchant in Antioch), assures his master that the young man who insists he is Judah Ben-Hur is definitely a Jew due to 'the intensity of his hate' and his desire to take revenge against Messala for his and his family's plight (223). Simonides' claim of hatred as a characteristically

⁹² Ben-Hur's invocation of God to justify his vengeance echoes Messala's invocation of the Roman gods to justify making war. Through this parallel Wallace suggests that the Jewish emotionology does not occupy the most elevated state in his hierarchy.

Jewish emotion reveals Wallace's 'othering' of his protagonist from the reader, the inversion of the 'necessary anachronism'. Ben-Hur's initial anger at Messala's derisive comments in their first dialogue, anger with which the reader was encouraged to sympathise, has now evolved into hatred, singular to a certain emotionology which the reader is discouraged from assuming.

Simonides harbors his own hunger for revenge against the Romans for abuse he incurred from them, and fosters Ben-Hur's growing conviction that he should support the new King of the Jews in the attempt (as perceived by Simonides) to crush Rome. Simonides affirms that 'revenge is a Jew's of right; it is the law' (313). Wallace thus sets up Simonides to be the rhetorical antithesis of Balthasar, whose message of the Messiah as a spiritual saviour shifts Ben-Hur's ideological (and emotionological) perspective, and prepares him for Christian conversion.

Wallace then establishes the limits of Jewish emotionology, in terms of moral determination, through the example of Ben-Hur. After Ben-Hur wins the chariot race and his desire for personal revenge is resolved, he does not experience sympathy for Messala, who is now crippled and penniless, or remorse for the magnitude of the ruin he has dealt his foe. Wallace provides here a clear point of departure from the Jewish paradigm of emotionology toward an emotionological configuration, that of the 'purely Christian nature', that precipitates what Wallace interprets as a better moral decision:

Henceforth [Ben-Hur] was to be the aggressor....To the purely Christian nature the presentation would have brought the weakness of remorse. Not so with Ben-Hur; his spirit had its emotions from the teachings of the first lawgiver, not the last and greatest one. He had dealt punishment, not wrong, to Messala. By permission of the Lord he had triumphed (*Ben-Hur*, 358).

In this passage there is an expectation for the reader to be familiar with the 'purely Christian nature', the emotional experience of compassion and remorse. The notion of Jewish triumph 'by permission of the Lord' is thus communicated as emotionally distant and foreign, with Wallace's emotionological explanation that '[Ben-Hur's] spirit had its emotions from the teachings of the first lawgiver, not the last and greatest one'. From the description of the 'lawgiver' Ben-Hur's mother originally offered, to Wallace's mention of him in the passage above, the definition of 'lawgiver' does not change. However, the 'otherness' of the Jewish conviction in the Law is pronounced when Wallace introduces the third, and highest, emotionology in his hierarchy as an alternative source of moral determination.

Christian 'divine emotion' and the affective process of conversion

After Messala's downfall, Ben-Hur's drive for revenge is channeled into his certainty in his role to engineer military support for the new King, who undoubtedly (in his view) intends to topple Rome and build a new world order. Ben-Hur's desire for vengeance, and the hatred that has come to be associated with it, begins to falter when he encounters Balthasar's impassioned advocacy for Christ as the Messiah and a spiritual saviour instead of a worldly avenger. When Ben-Hur hears Balthasar's definition of the Messiah's salvation—not a social and political transformation, but an internally spiritual individual shift—and subsequently witnesses Christ's Crucifixion, Wallace begins to allow his readers access back into Ben-Hur's psychological experience. Wallace engages the reader's sympathy for Ben-Hur as he undergoes cognitive and emotional conflicts, and a grand shift occurs in his spiritual outlook.

Ben-Hur has already experienced instances of Christian compassion, firstly in his encounter with the young Christ, who gives him water at the well when he is a slave (121), and secondly when he witnesses the misery of the masses in Rome while he is the adopted son of Arrius, and wishes he could relieve their pain (251). When Ben-Hur meets Balthasar, the latter describes to Ben-Hur the alternative kind of kingdom this new leader offers, a kingdom of spiritual peace, fulfillment, and joyous redemption from the things of the world, attained through faith and love, and not through vengeance. Ben-Hur experiences doubt and internal conflict between the appeal of a 'national liberty' achieved through force of arms, and the idea that contradicts Messala's 'Down Eros, Up Mars!', namely 'Love is better and mightier than Force' (263). Ben-Hur reflects, 'Life had been crowded with griefs and with vengeful preparations—too much crowded for love. Was this the beginning of a happy change?' (263-4). His worldview, the emotionology under which he has operated so passionately, becomes disrupted when he thinks periodically of the possibility that God can work miraculously within an individual, not just in the external, secular realm through the establishment of social laws. His former perspective is further challenged by the notion that God can be close to everyone at any given time, ready to listen without an intermediary (419-20). Thus, Wallace renders his reader a witness (potentially a fellow convert) to this intimate transformation that Ben-Hur undergoes, culminating in his conversion.

Wallace associates an equivocally defined 'divine emotion' with Ben-Hur's progressive exposure to Christian emotionology, and provides the opportunity for the reader to experience the phenomenon of this emotional experience with Ben-Hur. During Balthasar's conversation with Ben-Hur about the nature of the divine kingdom,

Ben-Hur becomes conscious of an ‘emotion new and mysterious, and...strong’ (245). Once Balthasar’s sermon ends, Ben-Hur notices the ‘pressure of a sacred silence’. Everyone in the vicinity (this scene takes place in the tent of Sheik Ilderim), after listening to Balthasar, becomes ‘startled as if by a majestic presence suddenly apparent within the tent’ (256). The reader is thus invited into the tent with the characters, and can undergo the same shift in emotion as Ben-Hur, in the same silent, sacred space. The emotionally intimate design of the narrative encourages the reader to experience the same excitement, trepidation, doubt, and hope as Ben-Hur, in the midst of a new spiritual movement emerging with Christ at the centre.

Wallace’s characterisation of Christ, particularly concerning the balance between his humanity and divinity (‘to the heart divinely original, yet so human in all the better elements of humanity’; 467) is worth consideration within Wallace’s construction of a Christian emotionology. Wallace continues to emphasise the elevated emotionological status of a socially and politically marginalised group, with Iras’ pronouncement of Christ as a ‘man with a woman’s face and hair, riding an ass’s colt, and in tears’ (479). When Ben-Hur meets Christ for the second time, after many years’ passing between his first encounter with Christ at the well, Ben-Hur studies Christ’s physical features, particularly the facial features, which Wallace describes as the source of emotions:

...[there] beamed eyes dark-blue and large, and softened to exceeding tenderness by lashes of great length sometimes seen on children, but seldom, if ever, on men. The delicacy of the...mouth...with the gentleness of the eyes...the fine texture of the hair...never a woman who would not have confided in him at sight, never a child that would not...have given him its hand and whole artless trust...The features...were ruled by a certain expression which, as the viewer chose, might with equal correctness have been called the effect of intelligence, love, pity, or sorrow...the results of a consciousness of strength to bear suffering oftener than strength to do (*Ben-Hur*, 438-9).

Ben-Hur’s prolonged meditation on Christ’s facial features, a meditation in which Wallace encourages his reader to participate, is representative of one of the ways in which Wallace seems to construct a Christian emotionological experience in keeping with nineteenth-century American evangelical traditions.⁹³ David Morgan describes the interest among evangelical Protestant communities in recovering the ‘face of the historical Christ’, and the widespread practice of ‘visual piety’ that emphasised ‘the face...communicative of emotion, thoughts, and sensation’ as an agent of devotion.⁹⁴

⁹³ Wallace (1906) 1-2. The first sentences of his autobiography (published posthumously) communicate Wallace’s alleged experience of believing in Christ’s divinity and humanity, without affiliating himself with an organised church or established doctrine.

⁹⁴ Morgan (1999b) 283, 303; Morgan (2012) 91-2.

Moreover, Wallace's definition of the delicacy and feminine quality of the features, and the gentleness and emotional transparency of Christ, echoes the model Morgan elsewhere has observed of the 'Christology visualized and promulgated by the American Tract Society... [which] stressed the accessibility, sympathy, and benevolence of Christ.'⁹⁵ The detail of Christ's blue eyes is reminiscent of a specific physiognomy that was circulating throughout the nineteenth century in accordance with that detailed in a letter written to the Roman Senate from Publius Lentulus, allegedly a Roman official and contemporary of Pontius Pilate, based in Judaea. The letter was often reproduced in an English translation, and from 1857 to 1872 the American printmaking firm Currier and Ives published a portrait of Christ according to the physical characteristics communicated in the letter, and titled it 'The True Portrait of our Blessed Savior'.⁹⁶ Wallace's inclusion of Christ's blue eyes was thus in keeping with 'historically accurate' images of Christ that were disseminated throughout Protestant communities in the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

The reader's view of Christ's primary emotions, namely love, pity, and sorrow is rendered differently from the points of access to Ben-Hur's or his mother's psychology. Wallace builds a gaze for his reader into Christ's face, instead of making the reader privy to Christ's thoughts. The reader is thus invited to cultivate a sympathetic relationship with Christ, whose divinity sets him out of reach of the reader's ability to be truly omniscient as to his cognitive determination. Thus Wallace emulates the tradition of devotional portraiture within the biblical fiction paradigm, both strategies creating an emotionological profile for Christ, and for Christianity, in keeping with nineteenth-century evangelical devotional practices.

Wallace's provision of access for his readers to the emotions Christ exhibits, whether through his facial features or through his words, sometimes manifests in his attribution of emotions to Christ that do not appear in the Bible passages he quotes directly. For example, Wallace renders Christ's cry, taken from Matthew 27:46 'My God! My God! Why hast thou forsaken me?' 'a cry of despair, if not reproach' (*Ben-Hur*, 513), whereas in Matthew the cry is simply characterised as 'loud'. At Christ's point of death, Wallace includes Ben-Hur's perception of a 'scream of fiercest anguish'

⁹⁵ Morgan (2005) 204.

⁹⁶ The text of the letter, reproduced in Morgan (1999b: 284), reads, 'His hair was the colour of wine, and golden at the root—straight, and without lustre—but from the level of the ears curling and glossy, and divided down the centre after the fashion of the Nazarenes. His forehead is even and smooth, His face without blemish, and enhanced by a tempered bloom; His countenance ingenuous and kind. Nose and mouth are in no way faulty. His beard is full, and of the same colour as His hair, and forked in form; His eyes blue, and extremely brilliant'.

(514).⁹⁷ Wallace's addition of Christ's expression of distinctly human emotions during his suffering came to be problematic for some Catholic readers, who were used to expressing devotion through the sacraments, while maintaining emotional distance from Christ, relative to the intimate degree of sympathy evangelical Protestants were encouraged to experience.⁹⁸

Wallace thus constructs an image of Christian emotionology that, in terms of the relationship between emotion, religion, and moral decision-making, has superseded the Roman model and has reinterpreted the Jewish one to provide a 'better' alternative. The final element of Wallace's construction of Christian emotionology, and the one most crucial to the predominant ways in which Christian readers would profess their emotional engagement with the novel, is Wallace's characterisation of Christ as a personal saviour at the Crucifixion, the point of Ben-Hur's conversion. Again, Wallace seems to promote the evangelical model of Christian devotion, by rendering Ben-Hur's conversion internal, highly emotional, and featuring a dialogue with Christ, who is interpreted as a 'guide' between earth and the heavenly kingdom:

All the eyes then looking were fixed upon the Nazarene....Ben-Hur was conscious of a change in his feelings. A conception of something better than the best of this life—...perhaps the spirit-life...began to dawn upon his mind...bringing to him a certain sense that...the mission of the Nazarene was that of guide...across the boundary to where His kingdom was set up and waiting for Him. Then...he heard...the saying of the Nazarene, "I am the Resurrection and the Life." And the words repeated themselves over and over, and took form, and the dawn touched them with its light, and filled them with a new meaning...[Ben-Hur] asked, gazing at the figure on the hill fainting under its crown, Who is the Resurrection, and who the Life? "I Am," the figure seemed to say—and to say it for him; for instantly he was sensible of a peace such as he had never known—the peace which is the end of doubt and mystery, and the beginning of faith and love and clear understanding (*Ben-Hur*, 505-6).

In order to understand the distinctive feature of Ben-Hur's 'emotional' experience of conversion (in which the reader is invited to participate), it is profitable to compare Wallace's conversion narrative with Bulwer-Lytton's conversion of his protagonist Glaucus, following the eruption of Pompeii in *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834). Glaucus announces his affiliation with Christianity in a letter to his friend Sallust, ten years after the destruction of Pompeii:

I have pondered much over that faith--I have adopted it....In my preservation from the lion and the earthquake [Olinthus] taught me to behold the hand of the unknown God! I listened—believed—adored! My own, my more than ever beloved Ione, has also embraced the creed!—a creed, Sallust, which, shedding light over this world, gathers

⁹⁷ The liberties Wallace took with Christ's emotions at his Crucifixion were sometimes criticised for their lack of biblical accuracy and for their inappropriate attribution of 'human' emotions to Christ (See Chapter 2, Section 3).

⁹⁸ Fisher (2008: 58-9) observes that Devotional Catholicism in the United States from the mid-nineteenth century onward featured 'revivals'; even these, however, were 'grounded in the sacraments, rather than in preaching that appealed strictly to the emotions'.

its concentrated glory, like a sunset, over the next! We know that we are united in the soul, as in the flesh, for ever and for ever! (*The Last Days of Pompeii*, 304).

The first point of comparison between the two narratives is the immediacy of the conversion experience for Ben-Hur. Glaucus is writing to Sallust ten years after the eruption. It is unclear whether he interprets the eruption as divine punishment for non-believers, a belief the Christians he encounters in Pompeii seem to adopt.⁹⁹ In any case, he seems to have reached the point of conversion through an intellectualisation of his experiences, and a reasoning (with the help of his Christian friend Olinthus) of his belief in the Christian God through his experience of rescue from the lion to whom he was about to be fed in the arena, and from the eruption.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, the elements of time (ten years have passed since the occurrence of events on which Glaucus bases his Christian belief) and the medium of communication (a letter) distance the reader from Glaucus' emotional experience at his point of conversion. Glaucus' comparison of Christianity to a sunset, as a means for believers of transitioning between the earthly and the heavenly realms, provides an interesting contrast to Ben-Hur's perception of the dawn coinciding with the words he hears from Christ, the personal saviour and conveyor of souls from earth to heaven.

Henryk Sienkiewicz's portrayal of Marcus Vinicius' conversion in *Quo Vadis?* (1896) emerges as an interesting synthesis of the conversion processes in Wallace and Bulwer-Lytton. Like Ben-Hur's experience, Vinicius' conversion is an internal process that begins with his initial hearing of a sermon from Peter, a process that Sienkiewicz, like Wallace, invites his reader to experience. Unlike Ben-Hur's conversion story, there is no real 'moment of conversion' Sienkiewicz chooses to highlight. There are clear stages of conversion (Peter's sermon, conversations with Paul, the baptism) whose significance Vinicius reports to Lygia when he requests that she witness his baptism, due to her status as his beloved and the person who led him to the first sermon he heard from Peter (*Quo Vadis?*, 300-301). This self-reflection over the stages of conversion occurs just before Vinicius' baptism, at the same time Rome is burning (Peter says,

⁹⁹ *The Last Days of Pompeii*, 275-6: '...a group of men and women, bearing torches, passed by the temple. They were of the congregation of the Nazarenes; and a sublime and unearthly emotion had not, indeed, quelled their awe, but it had robbed awe of fear. They had long believed, according to the error of the early Christians, that the Last Day was at hand; they imagined now that the Day had come. "Woe! woe!" cried, in a shrill and piercing voice, the elder at their head. "Behold! the Lord descendeth to judgment! He maketh fire come down from heaven in the sight of men!... Woe to ye of the fasces and the purple! Woe to the idolater and the worshipper of the beast!"' Interestingly, these Christians seem to be experiencing a 'sublime and unearthly emotion' similar to the one Ben-Hur experiences after hearing Balthasar's sermon in the tent. See Hales and Paul (2011: 13) for further discussion of this passage.

¹⁰⁰ The eruption of Vesuvius is interpreted by Bulwer-Lytton as divine retribution for Rome's corruption and pagan cruelty (*The Last Days of Pompeii*, 276-7). See Malamud (2009: 124-5) for discussion of the employment of apocalyptic themes in American evangelical sermons and implications of the reception of the eruption scenes in Bulwer-Lytton's novel among American readers.

‘The wrath of God is resting upon it’), an element reminiscent of Bulwer-Lytton’s design of Glaucus’ conversion, although Glaucus does not convert in the moment of Pompeii’s destruction (as Ben-Hur does at Christ’s Crucifixion).

Another interesting point of comparison between the accounts of conversion in *Ben-Hur* and *Quo Vadis?* is the means through which the to-be-converted protagonist interacts with Christ. Ben-Hur engages in a direct relationship, a conversation, with Christ at the moment of his Crucifixion, whereas Vinicius interacts with Christ through the medium of Peter’s sermon, and derives the greatest emotional impact from Peter’s account of witnessing Christ’s Resurrection. This comparison underscores the difference in the nature of Christian appeal between the two novels. Wallace invites his reader to experience Christ in his ‘personal saviour’ capacity, characteristic of American Protestantism. By contrast, Sienkiewicz introduces Peter as the Catholic Church, a necessary intermediary between the parishoner and Christ. By highlighting Christ’s resurrection as particularly emotionally impactful for Vinicius, Sienkiewicz may be emphasising his focus on the later stage in the development of Christianity, namely the founding of the Catholic Church that provides a necessary element of succession to the birth of Christianity Wallace portrays in *Ben-Hur*, just as the Resurrection is the necessary stage in Christ’s story that follows the Crucifixion. In other words, Sienkiewicz’s novel suggests that the ‘origin of Christianity’ narrative, at least for predominantly Catholic Poland, is incomplete without an account of the founding of the Catholic Church.

When these accounts of conversion are considered side-by-side, Wallace’s intimate, emotionally-laden narrative of the determined *moment* of conversion as a Christian triumph becomes particularly distinctive. It provides the crowning element of the supremacy the author assigns to the Christian emotionological experience—a Christian emotionological experience which in many ways represents the evangelical value system of Christian devotion. In the epilogue to *Ben-Hur*, Ben-Hur and Esther manifest their lasting commitment to Christian faith by demonstrating acts of charity in the realms of influence American Protestantism assigns to their respective genders. Esther receives Iras as a visitor into their home, and insists, ‘[My husband] has no feeling against you...He will be your friend. I will be your friend. We are Christians’ (518). Ben-Hur does not appear with the women in this domestic scene, yet Wallace assures his reader that Ben-Hur’s Christian sympathy is manifested through a public gesture—the donation of his fortune to Christians living in Rome under Nero.

1.4. CONCLUSION

It is evident that Wallace draws on specific elements of the genres of historical and biblical fiction, particularly strategies for emotionally engaging readers with the inhabitants of historical settings, to build a clear structure of emotionologies in his narrative of interactions between Romans, Jews, and Christians. The structure is hierarchical, with emphasis on the appraisal of the connection between emotion, religious belief, and moral determination. Wallace tends to incorporate attitudes and perceptions of these three groups that would have been familiar to nineteenth-century Americans, in his process of constructing a narrative that provides a metaphor for the redemption of political and social disunity in the United States. The healing of such disunity and ideological fragmentation, as Wallace suggests, is Christianity, and more specifically, an image of Christianity featuring an emotionology that associates moral determination with emotional transparency and sympathy.

Wallace invites his readers to relate to Romans, Jews, and Christians in his narrative with varying degrees of familiarity, in accordance with his characterisation of some groups as more ‘foreign’ than others. The next chapter will attempt to evaluate how receivers of the novel in the United States responded to these invitations. Were American readers inclined to see the narrative in Wallace’s reconstruction of ancient Judaea as a metaphor for their own plight, and for a possible solution to their circumstances? Was Wallace’s novel appreciated simply for its scholarly, ‘authentic’ rendering of a far-removed, ancient civilization? How did Christian and Jewish readers receive the characterizations of their emotionologies and religious communities? Did these groups interpret any points of offense to their sensibilities? The following review from a Baptist publication praises Bulwer-Lytton as a model for Wallace in ethnography, but gives special attention to Wallace’s delivery of the conversion narrative, in the respect it shows for Christ:

In the words ascribed to Christ...his pre-eminent dignity and godlikeness are never impaired. In these pages the reader sees, as one living then, the political, social, mental, moral, and religious condition of the world at Christ’s advent. As a work of romantic art it loses nothing when compared with Bulwer’s historical romances. Its descriptions of Eastern peoples, scenes, customs, philosophies, and religions are as vivid, correct, and dramatic as Bulwer’s; its men and women, with but one or two exceptions, are far nobler and purer....¹⁰¹

Another predominant theme in the discourse of the novel’s reception that emerges is the perception of Wallace’s return to Christian origins, a transcendence of the doctrinal fragmentation of Christianity experienced in the United States during the nineteenth

¹⁰¹ ‘Ben-Hur’. (1 April 1881). *The Baptist Review*. Papers of Susan and Lew Wallace, IHS.

century. The following review indicates that this aspect of the novel was indeed appreciated in some American (not even necessarily Christian) communities for its invitation to readers to unite in a ‘universal’ definition of Christianity found in the presence of Christ in the novel:

Ben Hur, a noble Jew...shows us how easy and naturally such a soul accepts the Christ, and how divinely grand it becomes when illuminated by the morning light of the Sun of Righteousness. The book is literally a “Tale of the Christ”, for it gives to the sublime verities of our holy religion of [sic] social and historical setting, so fit to the time, place and circumstances in which they were revealed to mankind; so just, natural and credible; and, at the same time, so grand and transcendent withal, as for the time being to inspire the reader with entire faith in its reality.¹⁰²

Chapter 2 will evaluate more extensively such impressions of the novel generated by readers and reviewers. Special attention will be given to phenomena of communities of reception that emerged in response to the novel’s circulation, on the basis of shared emotional experiences of reading, and shared interpretation of the novel’s function as a work of historical and/or biblical fiction. The invocation of particular passages from the novel in the activities of these groups will be of particular interest to an evaluation of the extent to which readers responded to Wallace’s invitations for emotional engagement with his hierarchy of emotionologies in *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880).

¹⁰² *Saturday Review* (27 December 1880), IHS.

CHAPTER 2: RESPONSES TO THE NOVEL (1880-1920)

2.1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of the evolution of the text of *Ben-Hur* will emerge periodically throughout the thesis. On the one hand this refers to the adaptations of the novel to theatrical and cinematic texts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These later incarnations of Wallace's narrative naturally engage in a dialogue with the text of the original novel, omitting or altering aspects of the narrative according to their suitability for the versatility of the new medium, and their potential value and appeal to the receiving culture. On the other hand, evolution of the text manifests itself through the novel as a changing material entity. Since its publication in 1880, *Ben-Hur* has never been out of print,¹ and its physical form and distribution have transformed alongside the development of the novel's reception.

It is this second definition, the observable changes in the materiality of the literary text, which may be identified as resultant from the emergence of distinct reading communities associated with *Ben-Hur* as a novel. The first edition of *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880) contained no preface, scarce footnotes, and no illustrations, save for a small floral decoration on the pale green cover. The author's name was printed 'Lew Wallace' (although many of the readers who sent letters to the author addressed him as 'General Wallace'), and the dedication inside read simply, 'To the Wife of My Youth'.² The communities of reception that began to emerge shortly after the novel's publication led to the production of derivative publications tailored to suit the interests of those communities. For example, in 1887 Harper and Brothers published *Seekers After the Light*, which consisted of excerpts from the opening of *Ben-Hur* with the magi following the star to visit the Christ child. These passages are accompanied by illustrations that resemble etchings.³ International interest in the novel, and subsequent translations of the text into twenty-one languages including Braille, provided an additional means of ensuring the text's physical transformation.⁴ Wallace contributed to the evolution of the text from literary to performative delivery, in his approval of staged

¹ Malamud (2009) 133.

² In the 1884 edition this was changed to, 'To the Wife of My Youth, who Abides With Me Still' to dispel rumours that Susan Wallace had died (Thiesen, 1984: 35).

³ A copy of this publication is held in IHS.

⁴ Thiesen (1984) 36.

readings and *tableaux* performances of selected passages from the novel in 1889, his permission for the exhibitors Klaw and Erlanger to produce a stageplay in 1899, and his own lecture tours, in which he would perform readings of the novel for audiences. Wallace's first eight-month tour in 1886 and 1887 brought him to 145 cities in the United States and Canada and earned him \$12,000 in royalties.⁵

By the end of the 1880s *Ben-Hur* had sold 400,000 copies. In the following decades there were attempts to distribute the novel to American reading communities of different socio-economic sectors. In 1891 Harper and Brothers published the Garfield Edition, which appeared in two volumes, bound in orange silk. The edition included photogravures of biblical sites including Jerusalem, the Tower of David, the Dead Sea, the Pool of Bethesda, the tombs of Lazarus and Absalom, and the summit of the Mount of Olives, and was illustrated with marginal drawings and decorations by William M. Johnson on every page.⁶ The Garfield Edition also included a reproduction of the letter (dated 19 April 1881) Wallace received from President Garfield in praise of Wallace's 'beautiful and reverent book'.⁷ This special edition cost \$30 a set, at a time when a farm laborer would have earned \$25 per month.⁸ In 1913, after *Ben-Hur* had already sold over a million copies, Sears Roebuck increased distribution of the novel to rural and working class communities by printing another million copies for purchase at 39 cents each through mail catalogue.⁹

This chapter will discuss dynamics of emotion in the experiences and activities of such communities of reception, and to relate these responses back to the invitations for emotional engagement the text offered, as discussed in Chapter 1. Knowledge of the novel's evolution in form and distribution, as well as awareness of the other texts of *Ben-Hur* in circulation, especially in performance media, are important to acknowledge contextually in the analysis of reader responses to the novel.

2.2. METHODOLOGY: DOCUMENTING EMOTIONAL COMMUNITIES OF RECEPTION

From the archival sources distinct patterns emerge with respect to readers' responses to *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880), including uses of the novel and derivative works

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Malamud (2009) 141.

⁷ President Garfield would later appoint Wallace as Minister to Turkey for the 'breadth of culture' he demonstrated in his ethnographic detailing in *Ben-Hur* (Morsberger and Morsberger: 1980, 295-6).

⁸ Thiesen (1984) 35.

⁹ Malamud (2009) 133.

(lectures, staged readings, etc) in entertainment, religious, educational, and other contexts. The evidence demonstrates that readers responded to the authorial invitations for engagement with the text, and constructed or sought out communities of reception in which they could share this experience of emotional engagement.

The archival material featured in this survey consists of the following types of documentation, covering a period from 1880 (the novel's publication date) to 1920 (the end date of performances of the Klaw and Erlanger stageplay):

- Unpublished material: correspondence between Lew and Susan Wallace and readers, reviewers, the publishing house Harper and Brothers, and the exhibitors Klaw and Erlanger (who would later own the rights to dramatic performance of the novel and produce the stageplay, beginning in 1899).
- Published material: newspaper and magazine articles and reviews; lecture programmes; Sunday school programmes; pamphlets and newsletters associated with the Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur.
- Miscellaneous items: membership medal and certificate associated with the Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur.¹⁰

These materials capture the beginning of the '*Ben-Hur* phenomenon' as American readers experienced it through their engagement with the novel. Within the survey of case studies exploring recurring interpretations and reception contexts, emotions will be considered for their influence in enabling readers' significant and sustained engagement with the novel.

The case studies featured in this investigation exhibit an individual or community response to the novel that is characterised by any of the following dynamics of emotion: reference to specific emotions, or manifestation of emotions, in the novel; discussion of actual or intended arousal of emotional responses to the content of the novel; testimony to creative production (e.g. *tableaux* performances, or rituals enacted by the Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur)¹¹ inspired by the novel that was intended for, or resulted in, consumption by audiences on an emotional level; the solicited and/or actual emotional responses of readers and audiences to the publicised narrative of the novel's composition and distribution; testimonies to the appropriation of passages from the novel for use in an instructional context (church, school) that also encouraged emotional

¹⁰ The collections from which this material comes include: IHS, LL, CDPL, and APD.

¹¹ Solomon (2012) discusses a kind of musical narrative that accompanied the various developments of the *Ben-Hur* text. Aspects of the 'music of *Ben-Hur*' include E.T. Paull's 'Chariot Race or Ben-Hur March' (166), the score for the Klaw and Erlanger stageplay, composed by Edgar Stillman Kelley (175), and the Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur's composition of an ode to the Tribe and its principles (172-3).

engagement with the text.¹² Amidst the varied reception contexts throughout the United States in the thirty-year period featured in this chapter, the underlying concern, and the necessity for the close analysis of primary sources for contemporary responses to the novel, is to understand readers' and reading communities' negotiation of solicitations for emotional engagement offered in the fusion of historical and biblical fiction manifested in *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880).

Three broad trends in audience response are observable from the sources featured here. Firstly, some readers, termed 'appreciators' in this chapter, testify to the experience of engaging emotionally with the novel through passive reading or listening. Other readers, termed 'conveyors', felt motivated to create a derivative product inspired by the novel designed at least in part (according to the testimonies) to enhance other readers' emotional engagement with *Ben-Hur* through the presentation of the story in new media. Finally, a significant pattern of audience responses involves readers' emotional engagement with the perceived persona(s) of author Lew Wallace. Jon Solomon mentions with respect to the author's 1906 autobiography Wallace's tendency to 'self-mythologise',¹³ or embellish the narration of his life in order to refine his celebrity image of lawyer, Union General, former Governor of New Mexico territory, former Minister to Turkey, bestselling historical novelist, adult convert to Christianity, and scholar of antiquity in accordance with the circulating public perceptions of him. From Wallace's correspondence with readers it is possible to observe the extent to which readers' desire to understand Wallace's authorial intentions challenged the author to negotiate the manifestation of this persona shortly after *Ben-Hur* was published in 1880. Wallace often kept copies of his responses to readers, a self-documentation that offers a remarkable level of regard for the exchange between author and reader. The final chapters of Wallace's autobiography, compiled by his wife Susan after her husband's death, reproduce letters from readers testifying to the impact of *Ben-Hur* on their lives.¹⁴ During this time when an interest in the personal life and motivations of the author was a phenomenon in Britain, this sort of legacy, built upon the author's personal contacts with readers, would have been significant.¹⁵

Certain considerations related to the sourcing of these documents must be made in order to acknowledge their scope, and their potential limitations, as representations of

¹² These criteria for the inclusion of material in this study of emotions in reader responses reflect the general criteria provided in the Introduction (see subsection entitled 'archival materials and editions for primary sources') to which the data of audience responses in Chapters 2 through 4 adhere.

¹³ Solomon (2015) 32.

¹⁴ Wallace (1906) 947-56.

¹⁵ Goldhill (2011) 250.

reading communities. Materials from the Wallace collections at the Lilly Library and the Indiana Historical Society contain a wealth of correspondence between the Wallaces and readers of *Ben-Hur*. Most of the reader responses therein express glowing admiration for the author and his work, with critical opinions or disparaging remarks representing the minority of responses. Since these collections in large part come from the Wallace family, they may be missing testimonies of some alternative emotional experiences of reading otherwise worthy of consideration in this analysis. The materials from the Crawfordsville District Public Library yield significant insight into the inner workings of the Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur, as well as other records of the ways in which the citizens of Crawfordsville, Indiana (Wallace's hometown) constructed emotional communities of engagement with Wallace and the *Ben-Hur* narrative. The materials in this collection are thus primarily 'receiver-oriented'.

Acknowledgment of the relative representation of reading communities in the source material is also important to mention. The responses mentioning an engagement with the novel related in any fashion to the experience of Christian religious practice grossly outnumber the responses mentioning another religious affiliation, or an areligious engagement with *Ben-Hur*. Exclusively secular interest in the novel is almost entirely absent, overwhelmed by the Christian fervour which attended the novel's initial circulation. The themes of adventure, love, and revenge in *Ben-Hur*, and Wallace's vivid descriptions of Roman decadence, the chariot race and the naval battle, become a major focus of audience interest in the 1890s, when the text of the novel begins to evolve through derivative productions exploring media concerned with entertainment and visual aesthetic appeal (*tableaux vivants*).

While the case studies here exhibit three major trends of reception (direct readership, derivative productions, and engagement with the 'Wallace persona'), the presentation of these sources also roughly reflects the chronological development of readers' engagement with the novel. Responses written directly to Lew Wallace in the first few years following the novel's publication (1880) are followed by derivative performances and other appropriations of the novel's content. The interaction between the 'Wallace Persona' and audience responses to the novel develops throughout this period and takes on new forms, as publishers Harper and Brothers and exhibitors Klaw and Erlanger gradually take on more significant roles as marketers of Wallace's image.

2.3. PATTERNS OF RECEPTION THROUGH DIRECT READERSHIP (‘APPRECIATORS’)

There is a high incidence of religiosity in testimonies of strong emotional engagement from readers. These readers often describe their emotional connection to the novel as a validation of religious feeling. Initial professional reviews of the novel aiming to discuss the novel’s primary points of emotional appeal raise the question of whether a purely secular reading of *Ben-Hur* was appropriate, let alone possible, for receivers.

Secular reception?

The *New York Times* review of the novel,¹⁶ dated 14 November 1880, two days following the novel’s publication, poses questions of the relationship between generic influence, authorial intention, and audience response regarding the potential for *Ben-Hur* to garner primarily secular interest. The reviewer draws attention to a discrepancy between Wallace’s claim that his novel was not intended to serve a religious function and the author’s apparent emulation of narrative models from American biblical fiction: ‘The Gospel story has frequently been paraphrased and rewritten, but usually in books of a devotional character....The present work has no religious purpose, the author distinctly announcing that disquisition is left to the preachers, he himself having but a tale to tell...’. This review suggests that biblical fiction was not only a recognised genre, but that it served a concrete religious purpose within specific Christian reading communities. This was among the earliest reviews of the novel produced by a widely read newspaper, and it is worth noting that, according to the article’s comments on Wallace’s professed intentions for his work, Wallace at this time seems to have been publicly identifying *Ben-Hur* as belonging to the genre of historical fiction rather than that of biblical fiction.

This reviewer clearly identifies the tenuous argument for a purely secular reading of *Ben-Hur* as a mere historical account by pointing out the author’s ‘attitude’ or invitation for his readers to engage in a devotional relationship with the text: ‘His intention has simply been to frame an Eastern story, the scenes laid at the time of, and the events depending upon the heroic story recorded in the New Testament. At the same time his attitude is that of a Christian believer.’ The reviewer supports his suggestion of this authorial intention by indicating the ‘pathetic eloquence’ of Wallace’s writing

¹⁶ ‘A Story of the East’ (14 November 1880). *New York Times*. Papers of Susan and Lew Wallace, IHS.

applied particularly in clear solicitations for readers to share in Ben-Hur's experiences of acute 'sorrow' and 'despair' during Christ's procession along the Via Dolorosa.

By the 1890s, the development of exclusively secular interest in the novel and its author was catching on. In November 1894, the *Los Angeles Times* produced an announcement for Wallace's upcoming lectures.¹⁷ This article exalts the novel's appeal to 'humane' sensibilities ('the chariot race, with its thrilling events and the complete triumph of Ben-Hur over the Roman Messala') and 'divine' ones. The 'divine' points of appeal are unspecified, and the announcement makes no mention of Wallace's personal religious motivations, although by this time Wallace was citing in his lectures his own conversion to Christianity as a crucial influence in his composition of the novel. This 'humane side' (or secular reading) of the novel garnered further interest following the production of the Klaw and Erlanger stageplay in 1899. In 1908, publisher Harper and Brothers produced a booklet entitled *The Chariot Race from Ben Hur*,¹⁸ a collection of excerpts from the novel dealing exclusively with the chariot race, beginning with the description of Ben-Hur's training for the race and ending with Ben-Hur's victory. Viewers of the stageplay interested primarily in the literary spectacle of the chariot race they had seen onstage could purchase this booklet, thereby experiencing the thrill of this climactic phase of Wallace's narrative without having to engage with the Christian messages pervading the rest of the novel.

Jewish readings

A passage from the 24 February 1905 *Jewish Outlook* observes in *Ben-Hur* a favourable shift in literary depictions of Jews, indicating that 'human law and sympathy' were employed in the novel to liberate readers from witnessing the 'aspersions' cast onto Jews by other literary and theatrical models¹⁹ in favour of some kind of universal feeling:

It was the literature of the Shakespearian era that maligned Jewish character with unjust aspersions. Singularly enough, it was literature's kindly office in the nineteenth century that softened the harsh touches of three hundred years ago... General Wallace's gospel was the touch of human law and sympathy that made Ben Hur and his friends men first and religionists afterward.²⁰

¹⁷ 'Gen. Lew Wallace: The Coming Lectures of the Distinguished Soldier and Author' (3 November 1894). *Los Angeles Times*. Papers of Susan and Lew Wallace, IHS.

¹⁸ Accessed at IHS.

¹⁹ Sachar (1994: 100) discusses the prevalence of negative portrayals of Jews still in circulation in popular entertainment during the nineteenth century: 'The likeness [of the Jew] was added to stock versions of the Yankee, Negro, and Irishman in American comic theater and vaudeville, and it rarely varied.'

²⁰ Reported in 'Lew Wallace' (4 May 1905). *Herald of Gospel Liberty* 98 (18), APD.

This passage comes from an article produced in the fortnight following Wallace's death, and can be considered within the scope of Wallace's legacy (as it was interpreted at that time) as an author whose work served an important cultural function for American readers in the healing of social tensions and harmful prejudices during the post-Civil-War era. The author of this article may be making an implicit reference to Shylock in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (1600) as a principal model of the maligned Jewish figure, who represents negative stereotypes of Jews, particularly with respect to wealth and business strategies. Yet the author does not appear to recognise Wallace's arguable reinforcement of this characterisation. The author's impression instead is that Wallace's application of the 'necessary anachronism' of Walter Scott renders Ben-Hur as a sympathetic character, freed from manifesting qualities of the Jewish 'religionist' who operates according to a distinctly foreign standard of emotional behaviour. There is a certain irony in this reading of the novel in light of the observation from Chapter 1, wherein the closer Ben-Hur comes to Christian *conversion*, the more frequently Wallace directs the sympathy of the reader to him.

A postcard to Lew Wallace from a reader, N. Liebschutz, in Louisville, Kentucky, reveals a more critical observation of Wallace's treatment of Jews in the novel: 'Ben-Hur is a work of a genius on a whole although in its last pages it is pueril [sic] and unjust to the Jew's religion.'²¹ This reader does not explicitly identify himself/herself as Jewish (although the surname of Liebschutz suggests that this reader may be of German-Jewish descent), nor as part of any other religious community, but clearly finds Wallace's portrayal of Jews, particularly at the end of the novel (the Crucifixion scene? Ben-Hur's conversion to Christianity?) not only unfavourable but also *unjust*. It is interesting enough that Wallace retained this postcard criticising his narrative decisions. Yet it can also be observed from this source that Wallace's characterisation of Ben-Hur's ascension from the Jewish level of the emotionological hierarchy of religion, emotion, and moral determination to the Christian level, and the accompanying association of moral uplift with Christian conversion did not go unnoticed by readers. The *Jewish Outlook*'s celebration of Wallace's ability to promote 'human law and sympathy' and its potential to unite Christian and Jewish readers in a common emotional experience is a notable contrast, particularly given that this article was reprinted in *The Herald of Gospel Liberty*, for whose readers, particularly of the

²¹ Postcard to Lew Wallace from N. Liebschutz (22 May 1904). Wallace Mss. II. 1904, LL.

evangelical Protestant tradition, the word ‘sympathy’ may have held a significant devotional connotation.²²

Catholic devotion and criticism

Published reviews of the novel in Catholic newspapers and magazines, and letters to Wallace from individuals who identify themselves as either Catholic parishioners or clergy, elucidate Catholic American attitudes toward *Ben-Hur*. Two major, conflicting responses, specifically to the emotional characterisation of Christ, emerge from these sources. An 1885 letter from Otto Fardetti D.D. of St. Francis Seminary in Wisconsin claims that the novel ‘escaped...nearly all of Catholic notice’ from the time of its publication to Fardetti’s own reading of it. Despite this, he describes the collective readership of the novel occurring at his seminary:

The sublime object of your narration, and the wonderful way in which you have succeeded in combining the various incidents of such an eventful life as Ben-Hur’s, with...the gradual manifestation and fulfillment of Christ’s mission on earth has...stirred up all the secret powers of my soul. The Messiah appears before us as I always wished him depicted to men.... Your book has caused quite a furore in our Seminary and both Professors and students are eager to read....²³

The letter describes a devotional response, a deeply personal, empathic connection to the figure of Christ, drawn by Wallace yet for this reader consistent with the biblical account.

This reaction lies in stark contrast to a comparatively critical response present in both letters to Lew Wallace and published reviews. A review published in the January 1884 issue of *The Catholic World*²⁴ generally appraises *Ben-Hur* quite favourably. It argues that the novel’s ‘real scope and purpose are very serious, and it is intended to teach the most important of all religious truths—the divine character and mission of Jesus Christ....’ Nevertheless, the reviewer finds fault with Wallace’s so-called ‘utterly unwarrantable’ characterisation of Christ’s emotions at the moment of the Crucifixion:

Mr. Wallace preserves faithfully the truth of the narrative of the Gospels throughout, and expresses no opinion directly or by implication which is not in accordance with the Catholic doctrine, with one important exception. In his description of the Crucifixion he calls the complaint of Christ, “My God!..Why hast thou forsaken me?” “*a cry of despair*”—an expression which is utterly unwarrantable. He adds also to the inimitable narrative of the Passion in the Gospel a finishing touch from his own pen entirely out of harmony with its subdued and divine pathos: “A tremor shook the tortured body; *there was a scream of fiercest anguish*, and the mission and the earthly life were over at once”.

²² Morgan (2012) 6.

²³ Letter to Lew Wallace from Otto Fardetti (28 February 1885). Wallace MSS. II (1865-1884), LL.

²⁴ ‘Ben-Hur’ (January 1884). *The Catholic World, A Monthly Magazine of General Literature and Science*, APD.

This reviewer's claim that Christ's suffering in *Ben-Hur* is 'out of harmony' with the biblical narrative, is reminiscent of other statements from Catholic readers and reviewers that express a dissatisfaction, or claim a profanation of the sacred, in response to Wallace's emotional characterisation of Christ and other biblical figures. An 1885 letter from a nun to Susan Wallace criticises the rendering of Joseph's relationship to Christ in *Ben-Hur* on the grounds that it is not in keeping with biblical precedent.²⁵ These critical responses to Wallace's attribution of human emotional characteristics to Christ are for the most part absent in the impressions shared by Protestant readers, who were to a greater degree encouraged in their devotional practices (including the reading of biblical fiction novels) to know Christ emotionally and to cultivate sympathy with his suffering.²⁶

Protestant or unspecified Christian reception

Reviews from Christian publications and letters from individual Christian readers describe an enhanced experience of religious devotion through reading *Ben-Hur*. A review dated December 1880 (a month after its publication), from the *Saturday Review* in Indianapolis²⁷ encourages Christians to validate and reinforce their faith through cultivating a greater proximity to Christ's origins in the reading of the novel: 'The book is literally a "Tale of the Christ", for it gives to the sublime verities of our holy religion a social and historical setting, so fit to the time, place and circumstances in which they were revealed to mankind'. According to the review, the novel contains a 'natural and credible' representation that links its Christian readers intimately, and seemingly *authentically*, with the origins of their faith.

This use of *Ben-Hur* as a tool for stimulating religious fervor is taken to another level in readers' reports of Christian conversion. Both readers and professional reviewers of the novel affirm the status of *Ben-Hur* as an agent for leading non-believers into the faith. One letter (undated) to Lew Wallace from a female reader in Mobile County, Florida is written in the form of a poem,²⁸ describing *Ben-Hur*'s function as a devotional tool for the reader, and as material for facilitating theological discussions with her children. This reader claims that knowledge of Wallace's personal religious affiliation will provide 'comfort', and this statement, combined with the

²⁵ Letter to Susan Wallace from Mother Angela of St. Mary's Academy (15 December 1885). Wallace MSS. II (1865-1884), LL.

²⁶ Morgan (2005) 204.

²⁷ *Saturday Review* (27 December 1880), IHS.

²⁸ Letter to Lew Wallace from Mrs. M.L. McCants (?) [name not clearly legible, and this letter is not published elsewhere] (undated), Wallace MSS. II, LL.

revelatory experience cited in the first four lines (below), suggests a conversion experience:

... Thus your "Life of the Christ" its bright beams have shed
In the gloom of my heart, that once was quite dead
To the truth, rightly taught, there "God in the Man"
And made to me clear, this is Salvation's plan

This woman may have been led into the 'faith' by Wallace's novel, but now wishes to follow the author in his denominational affiliation in order to find a religious community that reflects the sentiment she has derived from reading the novel. This poem-letter is also representative of the remarkable trend of creative productions Wallace's novel aroused in its readers (discussed fully in Section 4 of this chapter).

Two other highly emotive reports of conversion in letters from male readers sent to Wallace in 1886 and 1887²⁹ echo the desire for, or manifestation of, comfort found in a religious community, into which each has declared himself initiated by *Ben-Hur*. Nicholas Smith (1886) of Janesville, Wisconsin cites specific passages from the novel that facilitated his conversion experience: 'The touching scene of the Carpenter's son giving Ben-Hur a drink of water, the searching for the mother and Tirzah at Jerusalem, the healing of their leprosy by Christ, and the matchless story of the crucifixion made a wonderful impression on me'. Both readers also mention an ongoing emotional struggle (the 1887 letter from Geo Parrish in Kewanee, Illinois indicates that this was a result of social marginalisation) experienced prior to the conversion experience. The conversion derived through the reading of *Ben-Hur* is reported to have brought relief through an initiation into an emotional community determined by affiliation with a Christian church.

Christian publications also promoted *Ben-Hur*'s powers of conversion. The *Herald of Gospel Liberty* declared, 'Many a preacher can speak with...an elegance of gesture, a correctness of intonation, an invincibility of argument...and never have a convert. We do not regard such a person as a great preacher; though the critics might approve him. He is a great preacher who influences his audience to turn to Christ'.³⁰ The author of the review in the *Jewish Outlook*, quoted in this same review in the *Herald*, refers to *Ben-Hur* as 'Wallace's gospel'. This source touches on Wallace's developing persona as a preacher, and the growing status of *Ben-Hur* as a quasi-religious text, drawing converts more effectively than the Bible itself.

²⁹ Letter to Lew Wallace from reader Nicholas Smith (22 March 1886). Wallace MSS. II (1865-1884), LL; Letter to Lew Wallace from reader Geo R. Parrish, Secretary, YMCA (1 January 1887). Wallace MSS. II (1865-1884), LL. See Appendix 1 and 2 for transcriptions.

³⁰ 'Lew Wallace' (4 May 1905). *Herald of Gospel Liberty* 98 (18), APD.

Publisher Harper and Brothers furthered the engagement of Christian readers with *Ben-Hur* through the special publication of *Seekers after the Light from Ben-Hur* (1887),³¹ an illustrated reproduction of passages from *Ben-Hur* depicting the pursuit of the Christmas Star by the Magi. This book's content is purely religious, without mention of the novel's other features or even the character of Judah Ben-Hur, and was designed seemingly to provide a devotional meditation for individuals or families.

2.4. PATTERNS OF RECEPTION THROUGH DERIVATIVE PRODUCTIONS (‘CONVEYORS’)

Schoolteachers and clergy

The use of select passages from *Ben-Hur*, as well as Wallace's narrative regarding the novel's composition, in the instructive contexts of schools and churches yields another dimension of emotional engagement teachers and clergy encouraged their students/congregations to have with *Ben-Hur* and its author. Elizabeth Little, a teacher at a School for the Blind in Janesville, Wisconsin, shared her experience of facilitating this engagement in a letter to Wallace, dated 1886:

One enthusiastic girl sprang to her feet in almost breathless excitement during the reading of the Chariot Race....[N]othing so affected me as the crucifixion scene. I was then filled with a great unuttered groan of agony, and still the tender quivering voice read on and on, while the room was silent, otherwise, as the grave. How the dear girl could read it aloud at all is past my comprehension... “Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows”. It seems to me your book is calculated to bring this fact to many who might never be reached in any other way.³²

The oral performance of the novel, and the value this teacher found in formulating her students' (and her own) emotional responses to the text is of particular interest here. The mention of students' engagement with the secular and religious elements of the text is particularly evocative of the transformation of an educational community into an emotional community of readership. The teacher is the facilitator of and witness to this transformation, expressing her impression of her student's reading of the Crucifixion passage, in response to which she withheld a ‘great unuttered groan of agony’. This boundary of display or suppression of verbal emotional expression between students and teacher is interesting to consider particularly in the context of a School for the Blind, where the students frequently interpret emotional response through aural means. The suggestion of the ‘calculated’ design of the novel to induce conversion to Christianity, combined with the solemn, almost sacred atmosphere this teacher said she

³¹ Accessed at IHS.

³² Letter to Lew Wallace from Elizabeth Little (12 March 1886). Wallace MSS. II (1865-1884), LL.

witnessed during the reading of the Crucifixion, adds an element of evangelism to the teacher's role of the 'conveyor'.

The employment of *Ben-Hur* as instructional material within a liturgical context is another noteworthy aspect of 'conveyance'. An undated postcard to Lew Wallace from one 'C.C' shares his experience of this: 'That a Catholic priest should make "Ben-Hur" the subject of Confessional counsel is noteworthy and significant. There could be no higher word on the side of spirit'.³³ Here the novel is used in the sacramental context of Catholic Confession, which allows church members to be counseled by the priest toward the soul's reunion with God, and release from sin. The priest's decision to invoke *Ben-Hur* in this context demonstrates churches' growing acknowledgement of the powerful spiritual hold of the novel over its readers, and invitation to churchgoers to cultivate a stronger relationship with the church on the basis of the 'teachings' of *Ben-Hur*, in addition to the teachings of the Bible.

Even Wallace's composition of *Ben-Hur* was featured as an instructive narrative in churches, demonstrated by a Boston Sunday school programme (7 September 1910).³⁴ The programme includes the meditation for the day, or the 'Golden Text': 'Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's' (Matt. 22:22). In the 'illustrative' section of this Sunday school lesson, there is a citation of Wallace's fabled conversation with famous agnostic Robert Ingersoll about the existence of God. Wallace claimed in his lecture, 'How I Came to Write *Ben-Hur*', that this discussion inspired him to read the Bible and determine for himself whether God existed. In the Sunday School programme the reference to the Wallace/Ingersoll encounter is followed by a reported quotation from Wallace: 'The result of my long study was the absolute conviction that Jesus of Nazareth was not only a Christ and the Christ, but he was also my Christ, my Saviour, and my Redeemer. That fact once settled in my own mind, I wrote "Ben Hur"'. This anecdote is intended to be instructive, to inspire children to follow Wallace's model of 'absolute conviction'. It also suggests that the content of the novel itself was inspired by God, an idea that again encourages the perception of *Ben-Hur* as a quasi-sacred text, which can be used for spiritual guidance alongside the Bible.

³³ Letter to Lew Wallace from C.C (undated). Wallace MSS. II, LL.

³⁴ Recorded in *Zion's Herald* 88 (36) (7 September 1910), APD.

Stage performances

Tableaux vivants of *Ben-Hur* were staged with Wallace's permission from 1889-1899, on the conditions that Christ could not be impersonated, and that the performances would be staged according to a libretto, *Ben-Hur in Tableaux and Pantomime*, produced by Wallace.³⁵ Several sources indicate individuals' wish to perform staged readings outside of the sanctioned *tableaux*. Appeals to Wallace to grant permission for these readings expressed a particular desire to feature the Christian sequences of the novel in their delivery.

One woman, Virginia S. Mercer, writes in December 1896 that she has for two years been 'arranging and working up an entire evening's readings from your great book...'.³⁶ She offers to come to Wallace's house to present her work 'in simple Grecian dress, heliotrope in tint and use house programmes same shade.' She emphasises her focus on 'the quieter scenes...the depths of misery to which the mother and daughter have sunken, their great love for Ben-Hur, their faith, their struggle to reach Christ and the wonderful healing which followed.' Another woman, Lara McCosh of Salem Ohio, asks Wallace's permission to do a recitation of the Crucifixion scene before an audience.³⁷ In response to this latter request, Wallace reminds McCosh to abide by the rules for *tableaux* performances, and use only the sanctioned material (which did not include the Crucifixion scene. Wallace would later, in 1891, agree to allow the Crucifixion scene to be represented with his own written permission).³⁸

Conveyors of *Ben-Hur*, whether in educational, liturgical, or dramatic contexts, demonstrate a keen awareness of the emotional impression treatments of the Christian elements of the novel could have on the audience when/if staged or recited. Yet out of all of the conveyors who aspired to enhance the emotional experience of *Ben-Hur*'s readers, there is no clearer example than The Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur.

Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur

In 1894 the fraternal and insurance organisation The Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur was founded in Wallace's hometown of Crawfordsville, Indiana by David Washington

³⁵ Specified in the memorandum of the agreement made by Wallace and the City of Crawfordsville, Indiana (represented by David W. Cox, William S. Brown, and Albert S. Miller) (15 January 1889). Wallace MSS. II (1865-1884), LL. See Chapter 3, Section 2 for further information on the performances of Wallace's *tableaux*.

³⁶ Letter to Lew Wallace from Virginia S. Mercer (20 December 1896). Wallace MSS. II. 1896, LL.

³⁷ Letter to Lew Wallace from Lara McCosh (25 January 1889). Wallace MSS. II. 1889, LL.

³⁸ Agreement between Wallace and the city of Crawfordsville, with amendments, one of which states that the person producing the pantomime/tableaux needs written permission from Wallace to enact the Crucifixion scene (19 March 1891). Wallace MSS. II. 1891, LL.

Gerard and others with backgrounds in insurance, law, and politics.³⁹ The Tribe gained permission from Wallace and Harper and Brothers to use the name *Ben-Hur*,⁴⁰ and it emulated the structure of the Maccabees, a Canadian fraternal order and profitable insurance organisation.⁴¹ According to historian Roger Burt, there was a significant prominence of these fraternal organisations in the United States during the nineteenth century.⁴² While such societies provided numerous leisure, business, networking, and insurance benefits, the core of their widespread success was their ability to provide remote or frontier communities with crucial economic, social, and spiritual resources for survival through a pragmatic model of interdependency.⁴³

While the Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur enjoyed particular success as an insurance organisation,⁴⁴ as a ‘conveyor’ of derivative performances and interpretations of Wallace’s novel it generated a special emotional community of reception. The Tribe consciously employed the novel’s ‘moral teachings’ and Christian sentiment as an inspiration for the founding of a community of readers-turned-enactors of the novel. While the activities of other fraternal organisations in the nineteenth-century United States were shrouded in secrecy, the Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur, although it had secret rituals, contained one element that rendered its motives accessible to many: ‘The Ben-Hur story...enjoyed wide popularity which put the fraternity apart...The public felt it already knew what Ben-Hur was all about. The tribe was non-political, democratic and non-sectarian, though obviously Christian.’⁴⁵

‘Obviously Christian’ clearly qualified the requirements for inclusion in the Tribe: ‘...all acceptable white persons of good moral character, sound bodily health and of good reputation and who believe in a Supreme Being’.⁴⁶ While the notion of ‘Supreme Being’ may appear to be ambiguous here, the ‘Spectacular Degree’ from 1904 reads, ‘Our order is founded upon “Tale of the Christ” and the teachings of the Nazarene is its chief cornerstone...you should study the Holy Bible and the book “Ben-Hur” that you may catch the spirit and emulate the example of the grand men and

³⁹ Iliff (1994) 42.

⁴⁰ Hackstaff (1980) 37-8.

⁴¹ The Maccabees may have also served as a model for the Tribe because of the origin of their name. ‘Maccabees’ were traditionally the name given to the Jews who revolted against their Syrian Greek rulers of Judaea in 167-141 BCE (Feldman, 1996: 92). In *Ben-Hur*, following a brief fight between a group of Galileans and a group of Romans in Jerusalem prior to Christ’s arrival in the city, Wallace describes the renewed morale of the Jews, among whom ‘old tales of the Maccabees were told again’ (*Ben-Hur*, 408).

⁴² Burt (2003) 672.

⁴³ Ibid, 659, 672.

⁴⁴ In 1902, the Tribe’s newsletter, *The Chariot*, reported that the Tribe was number three in writing new insurance nationally (Iliff, 1994: 12).

⁴⁵ Iliff (1994) 15.

⁴⁶ ‘Objects of the Order’ (undated). Souvenir Book, Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur, CDPL.

women who, from the manger to the cross, knew the world's redeemer'.⁴⁷ The use of Wallace's novel alongside the Bible as a tool for moral and spiritual instruction echoes the use of the novel in liturgical contexts discussed above.

The publications of the Tribe reveal that emotional language was employed to communicate fundamental principles. The front page of the second issue of the newsletter *The Chariot*, dated February 1896, presents the 'seven great principles' of the Tribe: Faith, Love, Righteousness, Truth, Benevolence, Honor, Home'.⁴⁸ A membership medal from the founding year of the Tribe (1894) carries a seven-pointed star with the initial letter of each principle (Faith, Love, Righteousness, Truth, Benevolence, Honor, Home) inscribed on each point. In the centre of the star is depicted a Roman trireme, a picture Wallace gave to the Tribe to produce in the literature and memorabilia as a representation of the bond between the Tribe and the author.⁴⁹ The seven principles of membership in the Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur are further specified, but still highly general, when used to describe male and female members of the Tribe. 'Daughters of Hur' are characterized by emotional expectations (love, mercy, condemnation of the wicked), and 'Sons of Hur' operate under physical expectations ('manliness' could be translated as physically robust and/or holding a secure financial or political place in the community).⁵⁰

The Tribe's initiation ritual (The Court Degree Ritual of the Tribe) contributes significantly to the understanding of the ways in which 'conveyors' of *Ben-Hur* engaged with and transformed Wallace's invitations for emotional engagement through derivative productions. This ritual included role-play necessitating the purchase of costumes for a group, a 'Degree Team', who would perform the ritual (Fig. 2.1). Members of the Degree Team would appear as various characters from the novel, including Ben-Hur, his mother, Tirzah, and Quintus Arrius. Officers within the Tribe would facilitate the ritual, which featured reenactments of distinct passages from *Ben-Hur*. The scenes include the recitation of the nobility of the Hur line performed by Ben-Hur's mother; the condemnation of Ben-Hur to the galleys (Messala does not appear here; a 'Captain' is responsible for his enslavement); and the meeting of Ben-Hur and Arrius, when Ben-Hur identifies himself and the unjust circumstances which resulted in his slavery. This particular manifestation of the initiation ritual, published in 1910, was produced after the Klaw and Erlanger stageplay had been running on and off Broadway

⁴⁷ Iliff (1994); quotation appears on the inside front cover.

⁴⁸ Kerr, W.H. (February 1896). 'The Seven-Pointed Star'. *The Chariot* 1(2), CDPL.

⁴⁹ Iliff (1994) 5; the medal is held in CDPL.

⁵⁰ Younge, J. (November 1898). 'The Mission of T.B.H.' *The Chariot* 3(11), CDPL.

for at least ten years. The Tribe employs dialogue from the novel for these reenactments, a decision that in combination with the formerly observed promotion of the reading of the novel in conjunction with the Bible, indicates a preference for the ‘archetype’ text issued by Wallace.⁵¹



Fig. 2.1: Degree Team, Boonville Court, No.59, Boonville, Indiana (September 1902). *The Chariot*, 7(9).

The point of initiation comes when the initiate observes the Degree Team perform the scene from the play involving the slave Ben-Hur’s conversation with Arrius in the galley that eventually results in Ben-Hur’s freedom and adoption as a Roman citizen. The Degree Team member playing the role of Ben-Hur would remove his slave number 60, and hand it to the first candidate, who would put the number on himself/herself before being momentarily shackled to a bench and made to hold an oar. Thereupon, the initiate was ‘set free’, and proceeded to hand over the number to the next person. The use of this passage from the novel for an initiatory experience is significant, particularly given the use of the metaphor of freedom from slavery to demonstrate the acceptance of an individual into a united social and spiritual community. Finally, the ‘chief’ presiding over the ceremony would deliver the following address:

“The ceremonies through which you have just passed...are taken from the book “Ben-Hur,” upon which our Order is founded....Our aim is to foster and cherish the fraternal spirit and by united effort and purpose to help each other in the great battle of life, and, in the event of death, to spread the broad shield of Benevolence over the stricken heads

⁵¹ The use of dialogue from the novel instead of the stageplay could have merely been a result of the possibility that only very few copies of the script were actually printed. As Mayer (1994: 195) has observed, ‘the small number of copies [of the script] to survive suggests that circulation was restricted to those who had some legitimate reason for requiring it’.

of our loved ones, and finally, as Ben-Hur was adopted by Arrius, so we hereby adopt you as ‘Sons and Daughters of Hur’...⁵²

The military metaphors used here (‘battle of life’, ‘shield of Benevolence’), combined with the invocation of Arrius as an exemplum for benevolent protection and honour, recall Wallace’s military background, and the themes of religion and war in *Ben-Hur* (Ben-Hur’s desire to be a warrior for Christ, for instance). This rhetoric also reinforces the argument that the emotional and spiritual fellowship of Tribe members was founded in the tradition of fraternal organisations in the United States as communities of survival.

2.5. THE ‘WALLACE PERSONA’ AND RECEPTION OF THE NOVEL

The threefold ‘Wallace Persona’, or the public perception of Wallace as a scholar of the ancient world, a spiritual leader, and a literary ‘great’ developed alongside the circulation of the novel and the subsequent emergence of the reading communities described above. Discussion of the ‘Wallace persona’ will address the ways in which Wallace both sonorously encouraged and meticulously safeguarded his three-pronged persona as a preacher, a scholar, and a national bard, in combination with readers’ endorsement, or suspicion, of these elements of his public image.

Wallace as scholar

A combination of readers’ perception of the meticulous ‘historical’ detail in *Ben-Hur*, and Wallace’s self-promotion of his extensive research, led the author to acquire a reputation as a scholar of the ancient Near East, despite his lack of formal education in the subject.⁵³ Southern poet Paul Hamilton Hayne lauded Wallace’s erudition, predicting that the novel would unlikely become ‘popular’, but would ‘be cherished...by scholars and thinkers of every conceivable grade’.⁵⁴ Hayne even looks to Wallace as a veritable authority on Roman history: ‘I am glad that a scholar like yourself should confirm...that the unspeakable corruption of Roman morals during the better years of the Empire did not originate in Rome herself, but rather in the East — that corrupt and fast-decaying Orient, which subtly revenged itself upon the Roman

⁵² ‘Court Degree Ritual of the Tribe of Ben-Hur Containing the Court Degree Opening and Closing Ceremonies and the Installation Ceremonies’ (1910), CDPL.

⁵³ Solomon (2015) 30.

⁵⁴ Letter to Lew Wallace from Paul Hamilton Hayne (2 December 1880). Reproduced in Wallace (1906: 948).

Vanquisher by...filling his veins with sensual poison.’ This letter, dated 2 December 1880, is one of the first responses to the novel delivered by personal correspondence, and it demonstrates another writer’s appraisal of the novel as a work of scholarship to be circulated in the literary community. Interestingly, Hayne expresses apparent surprise that ‘the man lived in America...[who] could have written such a book as *Ben-Hur*!’ Hayne’s perception of Wallace as an American scholar of the ancient world providing for other Americans seemingly authentic portrayals of the Roman Empire through a work of historical fiction gradually became popular, somewhat through Wallace’s own design.

Wallace’s response to Hayne expresses the author’s surprise that his novel had found favour in the South.⁵⁵ When Wallace addresses Hayne as the ‘Singer of the South’, Hayne’s political background is brought to the fore. Hayne was a strong supporter of the Confederacy, one of the ‘literary men of the South’ who undertook the function of lifting the morale of the South during the war, by glorifying the old Southern aristocracy and the tradition of slavery.⁵⁶ During the Reconstruction, Hayne continued to be an advocate for white aristocratic Southern interests, demonising former slaves for their aspiration to be socially superior, or at least equal, to white Americans. Hayne’s praise for *Ben-Hur* suggests the ability for Wallace’s rendering of Roman moral degeneration to be identified as separate from its former association with social and political dissent during the Civil War, and instead as a source of valuable moral education for the United States as a whole. Yet, Wallace’s apparent surprise at the positive impression his novel left with a known staunch supporter of slavery indicates that the images of slavery in *Ben-Hur* may have been meant to suggest the horrors of Southern American slavery.⁵⁷

Hayne was indeed mistaken when he imagined that *Ben-Hur*’s appeal would be restricted to the literati. On the one hand, he did not anticipate the surge of Christian interest in the novel. On the other, he did not perhaps think that ‘everyday people’ would value the product of the accomplished scholarship he saw in *Ben-Hur*. In 1903

⁵⁵ Letter from Lew Wallace to Paul Hamilton Hayne (19 January 1881). Wallace MSS. II (1865-1884), LL.

⁵⁶ Eaton (1968) 98. See Smith (1991: 21-2) for instances of Hayne’s rhetoric.

⁵⁷ Although Wallace incorporates ‘Ethiopians’ in his description of the slaves aboard the Roman galley, he does not insinuate a racial undertone in his description of the slaves, who represent a wide variety of different ethnicities and are described as ‘mostly prisoners of war’. ‘A Briton...a Scythian...a Gaul, and a Thebasite. Roman convicts...Goths...an Athenian’. (*Ben-Hur*, 132). The fact that the Briton is also a slave may be Wallace’s means of saving himself from accusation that the slave ship is an allegory for British imperialism. The idea of the slave ship, and Ben-Hur’s liberation from it, as symbolic of a liberation from the political disunity, or liberation from the danger of decadence in the United States, seems more likely.

another reader, Mrs. Martha Campbell, characterises herself as a ‘plain woman’ (presumably with little formal education), for whom *Ben-Hur* was a ‘revelation...which the worn copy I own attests my own careful and interested study, and the handling of those to whom I have lent it far and near, I know that the reading of these books has made me a wiser, better, and more useful woman than I would otherwise have been...’.⁵⁸ Mrs. Campbell could be describing a conversion experience, or knowledge acquisition from the novel’s ‘historical’ content.⁵⁹ Whatever her ‘revelation’, she seems to take pride in her newfound identity as a ‘wiser, better, and more useful woman’. Campbell also paints herself as a kind of missionary of *Ben-Hur*, an agent for the creation of a special community of readership ‘far and near’.⁶⁰

There is also evidence of Wallace’s intentional construction of his image as a legitimate scholar of Judaea during the life of Christ. Susan Wallace in a January 1881 letter to a friend mentions the meticulous research her husband conducted to compose *Ben-Hur*: ‘The labor it has cost to write such a novel, concerning countries never seen by the writer, and civilizations now extinct, cannot be understood except by those who have made an effort in such a field. Every sentence, every line to the exact word of the clean spotless manuscript have been studied with anxious care...’.⁶¹ In his lecture, ‘How I Came to Write *Ben-Hur*’, Wallace underscores the challenge he faced when it came to illustrating life in ancient Judaea with accuracy.⁶² Wallace also claims his only mistake in historical accuracy was his miscalculating the date of the eruption of Vesuvius by four years. In the *Los Angeles Times* announcement of Wallace’s upcoming lecture, Wallace is quoted as validating his thorough knowledge of ancient Judaea in his later visit there:

I never had been in the holy land until after [*Ben-Hur*] was written, yet I found when I went there that my geography and local color were correct. In walking from Bethany back to Jerusalem over the path the Christ is said to have taken on Palm Sunday, I found the great white rock in front of which I had located the mother and sister of Ben Hur when praying for the coming of the Christ.⁶³

⁵⁸ Letter to Wallace from Martha E. Campbell (9 October 1903). Wallace MSS. II. 1903, LL.

⁵⁹ It is more likely the latter, since the conversion narratives are generally explicit in reported spiritual and emotional impact, neither of which this letter includes.

⁶⁰ Although Campbell’s testimony is written just after the turn of the century, her process of creating a community of readers to share her experience of moral betterment through the reading of *Ben-Hur* may reflect a trend of women’s membership in reading groups in the nineteenth century. This trend was founded upon a circulating belief that reading (particularly historical novels of the English and American traditions) served as a means of ‘education and self-development’ for women (Long, 2004: 337).

⁶¹ Letter to a friend from Susan Wallace (6 January 1881). Papers of Susan and Lew Wallace, IHS.

⁶² ‘How I Came to Write *Ben-Hur*’ (LL).

⁶³ ‘Gen. Lew Wallace: The Coming Lectures of the Distinguished Soldier and Author’ (3 November 1894). *Los Angeles Times*, Papers of Susan and Lew Wallace, IHS.

Wallace's description of returning to the Holy Land and finding landmarks associated with biblical episodes and with the narrative of *Ben-Hur* assumes an alignment among historical events, biblical events, and events in the novel. Wallace thus encourages readers to believe in the accuracy of his biblical-historical context. Moreover, he appeals to readers to treat his fictional characters as if they hold a special place in history, as historical figures unmemorialised until given a voice by the author. By defining himself as an authority on the manner in which the historical setting of first-century Judaea was *experienced* by those who inhabited it, Wallace advertised himself to readers as an accessible intellectual, an accurate historian, and an educator for Americans in the classics.

Wallace as preacher

Unpublished letters and published reviews indicate a widespread conception of Wallace as a preacher of Christianity for readers of *Ben-Hur*. Kirk Monahan in an undated letter to the author expresses his intention to read *Ben-Hur* and 'join the army of those who proclaim you one of the greatest of living preachers. Your work is read by thousands who never have read the Bible'.⁶⁴ Similarly, the May 1905 article from the *Herald of Gospel Liberty* claims with reference to Wallace's legacy, 'He is a great preacher who influences his audience to turn to Christ'.⁶⁵ This conception recalls the theme of conversion in reader responses discussed earlier. In this review, there is no tension between Wallace's message and the ambiguity related to the religious community to which *Ben-Hur*'s converts to Christianity are called. This can be contrasted with other readers' desire to know Wallace's church affiliation in order to join his emotional community of worship/readership.

Some in established churches found the ambiguity of Wallace's religious identity more problematic. Pastor Will L. Cunningham of a Methodist Episcopal Church in Southern Illinois writes to Wallace about a conversation he had with a fellow pastor that addressed the 'pity' that Wallace does not affiliate himself with a specific congregation. Cunningham also voiced his impression that Wallace 'indulged an appetite for strong drink', and shared this suspicion with his congregation: 'Recently in preaching from the Text...I referred to your book with the very greatest admiration, and then spoke of the author as I had been informed...and said what a pity that so great a

⁶⁴ Letter to Lew Wallace from Kirk Monahan (undated). Wallace MSS. II, LL.

⁶⁵ *Herald of Gospel Liberty* (4 May 1905), APD.

man should allow himself to yield to sensual desires.⁶⁶ Wallace responds to this letter by insisting that Cunningham issue a public statement to his congregation disclaiming his former statement, or face a formal charge of slander.⁶⁷ This exchange brings to light the importance to Wallace of aligning the public's perception of him with the esteemed reverence of the novel. Wallace's eagerness to safeguard his reputation as the messenger of a sacred narrative is also apparent here.⁶⁸

In 'How I Came to Write *Ben-Hur*' Wallace refers to his capacity as a preacher. The author explains that when he began writing the novel, he was indifferent to Christian faith, but thereafter 'I found myself writing reverentially, and frequently with awe' due to his own personal connection with his characters, their lives, and their interactions with Christ in the narrative. Wallace closes his lecture with a reading of the conversation among Ben-Hur, Simonides, and Balthasar about the nature of Christ's role in spiritual salvation, and a final word about his method of successfully portraying 'our Saviour...without sermonizing. In other words, in order to get away from the heavy pulpit method of argument and expression, you have to dramatize.' The importance of 'dramatisation' for Wallace as 'preacher' is to facilitate the reader's participation in Ben-Hur's spiritual awakening, through the observation of Christ's miracles and Crucifixion.

Wallace as literary immortal

Readers and reviewers acknowledged Wallace as a literary 'great', or as having achieved literary 'immortality'. The May 1905 article from the *Herald of Gospel Liberty* compares *Ben-Hur* with Homer's *Iliad*, Vergil's *Aeneid*, and Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in terms of their guaranteed-to-last appeal to readers, despite professional critics' literary evaluations.⁶⁹ The review published in the Indianapolis *Saturday Review* highlights a specific scene in the novel with which Wallace allegedly gains his status as an author whose work bears everlasting relevance:

The mother saw her son, for Ben-Hur was asleep on the steps of the palace; but she remembered that she was a leper, that her touch would be death, and with the mother's matchless love she "stifled the mighty hunger of the heart," only daring to kiss the sole of his sandal before leaving him forever, and going far to die without recognition. We do not believe that the description of her love and sacrifice, for truth and tenderness,

⁶⁶ Letter to Lew Wallace from Will L. Cunningham (25 January 1904). Wallace MSS. 1900-1909, LL.

⁶⁷ Letter to Will Cunningham from Lew Wallace (7 February 1904). Wallace MSS. 1900-1909, LL.

⁶⁸ In a parallel instance, Wallace publicly (in a 29 December 1893 interview entitled 'Gen. Wallace Speaks' in the *Crawfordsville Weekly Journal*, IHS) refutes an accusation of plagiarism, again made by a pastor. In this case Wallace further legitimates his scholarly persona by claiming his extensive investigation into this charge.

⁶⁹ *Herald of Gospel Liberty* (4 May 1905), APD.

purity and power, is surpassed in the entire scope of literature. If its author had never written another line it should make him immortal.⁷⁰

The impression that Wallace has tapped the source of literary immortality through the portrayal of emotions, particularly coupled with noble, and more specifically, self-sacrificing actions, is echoed in other testimonies. Poet Paul Hamilton Hayne praised the emotional colour of the same scene exalted in the *Saturday Review*:

The blended horror and pathos of this tremendous encounter... where passionate affection must be stifled and the loving women pass like ghosts or shadows by the form of the unconscious son and brother—are indeed inexpressible, and would, if embodied in some great painting, electrify all observers of sensibility, and take its place among the immortal chef-d'oeuvres of the pencil!⁷¹

The above sources claim that Wallace immortalised himself through *Ben-Hur* in two specific ways: through his capacities for vivid description (indeed, this lent itself well to the theatrical and cinematic incarnations of the novel); and through his ability to represent emotions explicitly and powerfully, in conjunction with the theme of familial (not necessarily Christian) sacrifice. The idea of Wallace's powers of emotional engagement rendering his work 'immortal' makes the assumption that emotions are universal, and can be evoked by the same work diachronically and cross-culturally.

This 'immortality' of the author resulted in a growing interest among readers to embark on a 'pilgrimage' to the residence of the author, and the site of *Ben-Hur*'s composition. A newsletter from *The Chariot*, dated 1898, describes the building of Wallace's new study amidst the beech trees near his home in Crawfordsville, Indiana, where he was known to have composed the majority of *Ben-Hur*. The building is termed 'A Temple to the Muses', suggesting a quality of divine inspiration that motivated Wallace during his composition of the novel. The article discusses the various Roman, Greek, and Byzantine architectural elements of the study's construction, and it renders the landscape against which the study is being built a bucolic paradise: 'The ground is rolling and has given opportunity for an artificial lake of considerable proportions, set as a kind of gem in a grove of magnificent beeches, which in summer are simply great umbrellas of foliage...'.⁷²

The development of public perception of Wallace's study as a quasi-sacred 'temple' due to its connection with *Ben-Hur* and its reception, a perception possibly

⁷⁰ *Saturday Review* (27 December 1880), IHS.

⁷¹ Letter to Lew Wallace from Paul Hamilton Hayne (2 December 1880). Reproduced in Wallace (1906: 948). Susan Wallace's letter to her friend (6 January 1881, IHS) assures her that she will be affected by the same scene, for 'your motherly heart will be touched by the scene...where "Ben-Hur's" mother fears to touch her sleeping son'.

⁷² 'A Temple to the Muses' (April 1898). *The Chariot* (3) 4, CDPL.

influenced by Wallace's own commentary,⁷³ was not a phenomenon unique to the case of *Ben-Hur* and its author. In fact, as Simon Goldhill has elucidated, historical novelists in Britain, including Sir Walter Scott and Edward Bulwer-Lytton, upon the widespread positive reception of their work,

...used their houses as part of the arsenal of self-presentation....the self-presentation of writers through their houses, [was] a set for the performance of their celebrity....writers' houses became sites of pilgrimage. As the inner self was felt by literary pilgrims to have been molded by the intense emotional experience of reading, so the place that had molded the self of the author was a lure to a further wondering imaginative embrace....⁷⁴

The promotion of the relationship between the author and his residence, as Goldhill has observed in the cases of Scott's home at Abbotsford, and Bulwer-Lytton's at Knebworth, may have provided models for Wallace when it came to establishing a 'pilgrimage' site to facilitate a further emotional communion between the reader and the author, a connection originally kindled by the impression of the author's words. Wallace's 'Temple to the Muses' is representative of the impressions that *Ben-Hur*, and responses to it from the varied communities of readership discussed in this chapter, made on its own author. The 'Temple to the Muses' that did not exist prior to *Ben-Hur*'s composition represents an effort toward memorialisation of the 'Wallace persona,' constructed both by the author and his readers, of a divinely inspired scholar, immortalised by the sacredness of a work that provided unity and identity for a young nation in a crisis of fragmentation.

2.6. CONCLUSION

The above case studies demonstrate that the original argument of this chapter (receivers of the novel engaged emotionally with the content of the novel and constructed communities of reception in which they could share this experience of emotional engagement) holds true in the following respects. This emotional engagement occurred primarily among Christian readers and reading groups, and was furthered by derivative performances of the narrative. The text over time came to be acknowledged as a 'gospel', or a 'sacred text', emotional responses to which were characterised by solemnity or reverence. The image of Lew Wallace as a kind of preacher also led to a

⁷³ The article goes into a significant amount of detail as to the specific architectural inspiration for different aspects of the design, and mentions that the faces chiseled into the frieze around the temple are meant to depict the likenesses of Judah Ben-Hur and his sister Tirzah. Perhaps it can be deduced from the profundity of 'insider information' that Wallace contributed some commentary to the author of this article.

⁷⁴ Goldhill (2013) 94.

conception of *Ben-Hur* as a religious text. Thus, Christian readers began to perceive Wallace himself as a model for spiritual fulfillment, and conviction in their faith; Wallace was also perceived as a significant font of knowledge for the Christian community when it came to rediscovering the sacred origins of Christianity, in an intimate, personal manner.

The 'Wallace persona' also encapsulates the image of the author as a scholar of the ancient Near East, but a scholar whose mission is to educate Americans in particular. This conception, in combination with the circulating idea of Wallace's immortality as a national bard, one who captures the American cultural identity in such a fundamental way as to rival Homer's or Vergil's capacity to do the same for Greece or Rome, is a phenomenon which can be considered influential in response to the bigger question of the extent to which the novel functioned as an agent of ideological transformation, and unity, in the post-Civil War United States.

Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ was extraordinary in its capacity to engage a range of readers in the United States from different regional, political, and religious backgrounds, including those who had never read a novel, whether due to religious proscription or regional limitations. The following suggestion made by Howard Miller indicates a meeting place for emotion in the novel and emotion in receivers' responses to the novel's invitations for emotional engagement: 'Wallace's *Ben-Hur* helped to reunite the nation in the years following Reconstruction. The novel resonated with some of the most significant issues in late Victorian culture: gender and family; slavery and freedom; ethnicity and empire; and nationhood and citizenship'.⁷⁵ Indeed, Wallace's novel not only addressed the issues Miller has mentioned, but addressed them by appealing to the distinctly American complexes that seem to have influenced both Wallace's treatment of them in his novel and his readers' responses to them.

⁷⁵ Miller (2008) 154-5.

CHAPTER 3: *BEN-HUR* IN DRAMATIC PERFORMANCE AND EARLY SILENT CINEMA (1889-1920)

3.1. INTRODUCTION

It is a matter of small concern whether the patron...be Jew or Gentile, a devotee of liturgical religions or indifferent to formalism and creeds, he finds in "Ben Hur," as interpreted by the company now presenting it, an outlet for those emotions which measure the degree of his spiritual and ethical advancement. These emotions are latent in all of us, however capable some of us may be in repressing them. They are in no sense hysterical or exotic. They only need awakening and "Ben Hur" awakens them as no other dramatic offering has awakened them in the history of the world.... (*New York Telegraph*, 1916)¹

This chapter will focus upon dynamics of emotion in the transformation of Wallace's novel into a performed text, and the American cultural responses to this significant shift in medium through which the story of *Ben-Hur* was communicated. Within a decade of the novel's publication, individuals were staging before audiences unauthorised *tableaux vivants* arrangements and stereopticon slide shows adapted from the novel.² The emergence of reception communities desiring to experience *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* through a visual medium ushered in a roughly thirty-year period (1889-1920) during which authorised and unauthorised performances of *Ben-Hur* competed for audiences. Three distinct adaptations in two performance media (theatre and early cinema) are emblematic of *Ben-Hur*'s transition from literary to performed text: Wallace's *Ben-Hur in Tableaux and Pantomime* (1889-1899); Klaw and Erlanger's *Ben-Hur* (1899-1920); and Kalem Studios' unauthorised *Ben-Hur* (1907) film.

The primary text for analysis will be the Klaw and Erlanger *Ben-Hur* (1899-1920). Chronologically the stageplay is (following Wallace's novel) the next major incarnation of the *Ben-Hur* narrative that was widespread in its promotion, accessibility for audiences from various regions, and documented audience responses. This production has a complex reception history, having been exhibited on and off Broadway for twenty-one years, from its New York debut in November 1899 through to its final performances in April 1920.³

¹ "'Ben Hur' Always New—The Wonder Play in History' (8 November 1916). *New York Telegraph*. *Ben-Hur* Scrapbook, NYPL.

² Morsberger and Morsberger (1980) 454.

³ Solomon (2012) 174.

Of the adaptations authorised by either Wallace or those with the rights to his work, the stageplay currently receives the least amount of scholarly attention. Before David Mayer's reproduction of and commentary on William Young's playscript in *Playing Out Empire* (1994), scholarship focused almost exclusively on narrating the circumstances surrounding the stageplay's production, original promotion, and initial reception. Wallace biographers Robert and Katharine Morsberger describe the emergence of the partnership among publisher Harper and Brothers, Lew Wallace, and exhibitors Klaw and Erlanger that oversaw the composition of the stageplay, and cite some examples of contemporary audiences' experience of the stageplay reported in newspaper reviews or in unpublished letters to Wallace.⁴ However, given that the focus of their work is Wallace's life and career, the attention on the experience of audiences of *Ben-Hur* in dramatic performance is rather cursory. Margaret Malamud briefly mentions the stageplay in conjunction with other, less widespread manifestations of the 'Ben-Hur phenomenon' (such as the emergence of the Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur) in the late nineteenth century as symptomatic of a lasting American cultural investment in Wallace's story.⁵

Howard Miller's forthcoming article on Christian audiences' responses to the Klaw and Erlanger production contains the only sustained discussion of trends in promotion and spectatorship throughout the production's twenty-one-year run. Miller's collection of primary source material includes some newspaper and magazine reviews explicitly describing the emotional experiences of Christian viewers in response to the religious content of the play.⁶ David Mayer offers a description of the stagecraft, particularly in the chariot race sequence, and Katherine Preston and Jon Solomon both offer commentary on the composition of Edgar Stillman Kelley's musical score.⁷

These relatively recent contributions documenting the promotion, appearance, and reception of *Ben-Hur* onstage will be of value to the following discussion of the ways in which emotions operate in the promotion strategies, in the theatre, and in audience members' reports of the production. In addition to maintaining a focus on emotions, this chapter will contribute to the existing scholarship, which, with the exception of David Mayer's forthcoming chapter on the adaptation (or the omission) of episodes from Wallace's novel for the stage, does not prioritise close analysis of the

⁴ Morsberger and Morsberger (1980) 456-66.

⁵ Malamud (2009) 133.

⁶ Miller (forthcoming) 16.

⁷ Mayer (1994: 193-4); Preston (1994: 24-5); Solomon (2012: 175-6).

Klaw and Erlanger production.⁸ The scheme for analysis of the Klaw and Erlanger *Ben-Hur* in this chapter will feature readings of scenes from the play as they would have appeared to audiences in the theatre. This process involves the integration of extant sources for the script, the music, the actors, the costume, and the stagecraft (including sets, backdrops, and technological features, such as lighting and the treadmills for the horses used in the chariot race sequence). By providing a holistic (not only script-based) reading, this analysis will explore the ways in which the production interacts with Wallace's novel on narrative, aesthetic, and thematic levels, and engages popular responses to the novel discussed in Chapter 2.

It is often taken for granted that the Klaw and Erlanger production did not change significantly throughout its approximate 6,000 performances to a total of over ten million people, and an investigation of primary resources documenting the staging of the production throughout the years more or less confirms this.⁹ However, the archival sources do demonstrate some ways in which public perceptions of the stageplay, and popular cultural associations with Wallace's written narrative, experienced transformation throughout this period. It is also worth noting that the production underwent various advertising campaign strategies over the decades, reflecting the evolving climate of social, religious, and political discourse, and popular attitudes toward the theatre, specifically in terms of its purported capacity for entertainment, education, and Christian moral uplift in American society. The few alterations the play did experience over the years included casting changes to the principal roles, and efforts in the first decade of the twentieth century to heighten the grandeur of the chariot race by including four, instead of the previous two, chariots onstage.¹⁰ It is in the promotion and the reception of the stageplay that a tension emerges, namely the division of public focus on the play's relationship to the religious and the secular elements in the novel.

The stageplay can more accurately be perceived as the focal point of a period, rather than an instance, of *Ben-Hur*'s reception. The stageplay occupies a pivotal place within the continuum of the relationship between narrative text and reception, which sometimes involves the development of new texts in response to popular receptions of the original text. Chief examples of this include Wallace's lectures, most prominently 'How I Came to Write *Ben-Hur*',¹¹ or Wallace's novella, 'The Boyhood of Christ'

⁸ Miller (forthcoming: 26, endnote 2) likewise notes this absence.

⁹ Solomon (2012: 174); Miller (forthcoming: 1).

¹⁰ Morsberger and Morsberger (1980) 466.

¹¹ 'How I Came to Write *Ben-Hur*', LL.

(1888),¹² both of which were composed to encourage the continued interest of Christian readers. The circumstances of the stageplay's emergence as a *performed* text of Wallace's novel can be perceived in relationship to readers' expressed desire to engage with the novel through the medium of theatre (demonstrated through the staging of unauthorised *tableaux* performances following the novel's publication). In order to understand this desire of readers to experience *Ben-Hur* in performance, and in order to analyse the ways in which the novel was adapted for the stage in part by encouraging audiences' affective relationships with certain elements of the story, the stageplay must be contextualised within a gradual process of the novel's evolution into a performed text.

There existed notable contemporary precedents for the two-way adaptation of narratives about the struggles of virtuous Christians under the decadent and oppressive Roman Empire between the media of historical novels and 'toga plays'.¹³ Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) had been developed by firework manufacturer James Pain into a pyrodrama on Coney Island in the 1890s, and was shown to audiences of up to 10,000.¹⁴ Wilson Barrett's toga play *The Sign of the Cross*, which enjoyed considerable success in both the United States and Britain, premiered in the United States in 1895,¹⁵ and was adapted by the playwright into a novel in 1896.¹⁶ The permeability of the boundary between historical fiction and theatre led several readers of Wallace's novel who were also members of the theatre industry in both the United States and Britain to approach the author with offers to adapt his novel into a play.¹⁷

The bulk of this chapter will be devoted to a discussion of the representation of emotions in the texts, emotional language in promotional strategies for the texts, and audiences' reported affective responses to the texts, regarding the three performance adaptations of *Ben-Hur* mentioned above (with greatest emphasis given to the Klaw and Erlanger production). Wallace's *Ben-Hur in Tableaux and Pantomime* (1889-1899), although mentioned in secondary scholarship, has been significantly surveyed neither

¹² Published by Harper and Brothers.

¹³ Mayer (1994: 1-2) suggests that this was a circulating term at the end of the Victorian period used to describe a category of plays defined by "'sensation" melodrama set somewhere in the post-Republican Roman Empire...periods remembered by early Christian writers as times of persecution and martyrdom'.

¹⁴ Mayer (1994) 90-1.

¹⁵ Barrow (2010) 216.

¹⁶ Mayer (1994) 112.

¹⁷ See Morsberger and Morsberger (1980: 453-6) for an account of letters Wallace received from various playwrights, theatre managers, and exhibitors prior to his agreement to partner with Klaw and Erlanger.

for its content nor its reception.¹⁸ However, the Lilly Library and Crawfordsville District Public Library do include newspaper reviews with commentary on the staging of *tableaux vivants* in regional venues, most often churches and opera houses, in the United States, and these are worth considering in relationship to the growing secular interest in Wallace's narrative that accompanied its circulation as a performed text. Unfortunately, there is very little evidence available to reconstruct the aesthetic details of the performances, so for the most part observations about the representation of emotions will revolve around the script.

Analysis of emotions in the Klaw and Erlanger production will place the script, photographs of the play, newspaper reviews, and the musical score in conversation with one another. This holistic reading of various aesthetic elements of the production is consistent with Miller's observation that, on the basis of impressions shared by audience members in both published and unpublished reviews, audiences for the most part experienced the play as a dynamic interplay of various elements without a sustained primary focus on the actors and their speech.¹⁹

There is ample documentation, particularly in the '*Ben-Hur* scrapbook' at the New York Public Library's Billy Rose Theatre Collection, of American promotion and reception of the stageplay over the twenty-one-year period of circulation. Within the same one-to-two-year time frame, advertising campaigns tended to be more or less the same for different cities (even different states). Thus, due to the nature of the evidence, the general trends in promotion strategy and audience engagement patterns will be considered in greater respect to their diachronic change than to their synchronic regional distinctions.

The dynamics of emotion in the promotion, text, and reception of Kalem's unauthorised 1907 film *Ben-Hur* will be offered as a special representation of the perpetual American cultural desire to explore Wallace's narrative in new media, amidst the circulation of the stageplay. As a medium, early narrative cinema exhibits significant borrowings from theatre (such as staging and acting style), and the 1907 film can thus be considered in part as a response to the Klaw and Erlanger production in terms of the ways in which it invites audiences to engage with interpretations of Wallace's narrative alternative to those provided by Klaw and Erlanger. However, since due to its infamous infringement of copyright this film enjoyed a very limited

¹⁸ Solomon (2014: 31, 69, 73) includes some details of the composition history, the content, and the staging of this production. Morsberger and Morsberger (1980: 455) present the earnings of the performances at various venues in the United States. However, there is currently no comprehensive survey of the content, despite the survival of the script in the Library of Congress.

¹⁹ Miller (forthcoming) 13.

circulation,²⁰ this chapter will offer a comparatively less exhaustive account of emotions in the promotion, text, and reception of *Ben-Hur* (1907), the silent film.

Due to the nature of the evidence, it is necessary for the most part to rely upon published reviews and promotional materials to reconstruct ‘emotional communities’ of reception, whether religious or secular, and their emotional engagement with the performed texts featured in this chapter. Relative to the plethora of letters from individual readers to Wallace discussed in Chapter 2, almost no unpublished personal commentaries survive, and those that are extant describe the Klaw and Erlanger production exclusively.

Reviews of these three productions only grant a limited view of the emotional impression the stageplay had on its audiences, since these are generally written from the perspectives of professional critics. Additionally, at times it is difficult to distinguish reviews from promotional material, due to the occasional appropriation of one by the other. However, publications about performed texts of *Ben-Hur* with nationwide or provincial readership are of value when considered for their role in defining, representing, and perpetuating significant levels of collective emotional engagement with these three productions.

3.2. EMERGENCE OF *BEN-HUR* ON STAGE

The reception context which witnessed the emergence of *Ben-Hur in Dramatic Tableaux and Pantomime* (1889-1899) and the Klaw and Erlanger *Ben-Hur* (1899-1920) was characterised by a growing anticipation of readers’ eagerness to consume *Ben-Hur* in performance media. As mentioned briefly in Chapter 2, amidst the circulation of unauthorised performance versions of his novel, Wallace published a libretto, *Ben-Hur in Dramatic Tableaux and Pantomime*, with Harper and Brothers in 1891 and authorised David W. Cox, William S. Brown, and Albert S. Miller of Crawfordsville, Indiana, to stage performances from this libretto throughout the United States for forty years. In the 1889 agreement between Wallace and Cox, Brown, and Miller, a special privilege is granted to ‘Christian Church[es]’ to stage a production of Wallace’s libretto as long as it is performed locally by the congregation.²¹

²⁰ The case against Kalem Studios for producing a motion picture version of *Ben-Hur* without permission from Wallace’s estate and Klaw and Erlanger, owners of the dramatic rights, is the subject of Solomon’s article (2013).

²¹ Memorandum of agreement between Wallace and the City of Crawfordsville (15 January 1889), LL.

Wallace thus encouraged pre-existing Christian communities of reception to further their engagement with his novel by taking on the roles of characters (with the exception of Christ, whose physical representation was prohibited, according to the terms of the agreement). As Robert and Katharine Morsberger point out, Wallace's sixty-one-page libretto lacks straightforward structure, and relies on prior audience familiarity with the story in order to be understood cohesively. As a combination of explanatory readings, sequences for pantomime, and select passages from the novel consisting of dialogue interspersed with description, the libretto does not resemble a playscript.²² The longest sequence by far is the chariot race, whose explanatory text consists of thirteen pages and was presumably read aloud (there is very little evidence for staging apart from details Wallace included in his libretto).²³

The Crucifixion was not permitted to be staged, but the protagonists' affective responses to this event are emphasised in the libretto. Ben-Hur, Simonides, Esther, and Balthasar gaze offstage, 'to the left, in attitudes of fear, wonder, and devotion'. At this point the lights begin to dim, and the figures onstage cry out and throw themselves from side to side, enacting the earthquake that accompanies Christ's moment of death. The lights come up and reveal 'in distant extension across the ground from left to right, the shadows of the three crosses upreared, each with a victim upon it...'.²⁴ This pantomime, which Wallace names 'The Shadow of the Cross', is followed by the epilogue, where Iras comes to the villa of Ben-Hur and Esther to announce her murder of Messala and to reconcile with Esther before her suicide, despite Esther's appeals for her to 'stay and see my husband. We are Christians'.²⁵ For Wallace, the resolution wherein the villains both die and Ben-Hur and Esther convert to Christianity, and lead a life of Christian sympathy and charity, was essential to the adaptation of his novel for performance. Since Wallace seems to have insisted on a consistent rendering of Ben-Hur's conversion at the moment of the Crucifixion, he devised a means of staging this event that avoided the impersonation of Christ onstage, and instead emphasised the emotional responses of the witnesses. The aspects of Christ's presence that do appear onstage (the change in lighting, the simulated earthquake, and the shadow of the cross) may have influenced Klaw and Erlanger's decision to represent Christ as a similar atmospheric phenomenon, a brilliant beam of light. There is very little surviving evidence to indicate patterns of audience response to the performance of *Ben-Hur in Dramatic Tableaux and*

²² Morsberger and Morsberger (1980) 454-5.

²³ Wallace (1891) 28-41.

²⁴ Ibid, 58-60.

²⁵ Ibid, 61.

Pantomime, but box office receipts from 1897 and 1898 housed in the Lilly Library suggest that right up until the debut of the Klaw and Erlanger production, Wallace's libretto was being staged successfully in opera houses in cities as far apart from one another as Buffalo, New York, Des Moines, Iowa, and Dallas, Texas.²⁶

By contrast, there is much more documentation regarding the development of the Klaw and Erlanger *Ben-Hur* and the initial concerns of the authors (Wallace and Klaw and Erlanger particularly) related to prospective audiences' emotional engagement with the onstage representation of the novel, particularly the biblical episodes.²⁷ The Wallace collection at the Lilly Library offers a play-by-play account of the various appeals made by readers, exhibitors, and theatre managers seeking to produce the novel onstage, leading up to the point at which Wallace accepted the offer from Klaw and Erlanger. One letter from a W.W. Allen in Bristol, England expressed his wife's desire to produce a stage version of *Ben-Hur*. The petition even includes outlines of specific acts and scenes. Allen anticipates that *Ben-Hur* would outperform Wilson Barrett's *Sign of the Cross*, a recent success in London.²⁸

Wallace's response to this letter ('[staging the novel] would be a profanation not of the book, but the most sacred of characters to which it must be considered dedicated') reflects the author's relentless efforts to preach, albeit humbly, his consistently reverential attitude toward 'sacred' subject matter of his novel. Wallace prioritises the protection of the 'sacred', while Wilson Barrett was known for publicly declaring his intention to promulgate the message of Christian salvation in the theatre, in order to enhance the moral function of this art form.²⁹ When word got around as to Wallace's ideological position, petitioners in the theatre industry furthered their approaches, expressing sympathy with Wallace's views. For instance, Elisabeth Marbury, a dramatic agent in New York City, wrote to Wallace in February 1899:

I am well aware that persistent applications have been made to you by managers and others to acquire the dramatic rights of your noble book "Ben Hur". I have also been informed that up to the present time you have declined all propositions of this nature. Nevertheless...I venture to address you.... Treated in the spirit of reverence I do not see how "Ben Hur" put upon the stage could fail to make a profound impression.³⁰

Publishers Harper and Brothers discussed with Wallace the merits of Marbury as a potential candidate, but advised him to choose Klaw and Erlanger, due to the great

²⁶ Box office statements (1897-1898). Wallace MSS. II. 1897/1898, LL. See also Morsberger and Morsberger (1980: 455).

²⁷ This emerges to a much greater extent during the production of MGM's 1925 *Ben-Hur* (Chapter 4, Section 2).

²⁸ Letter from W.W. Allen to Lew Wallace (26 October 1898). Wallace MSS. II. 1898, LL.

²⁹ See Richards (2009) 101-2.

³⁰ Letter from Elisabeth Marbury to Lew Wallace (9 February 1899). Wallace MSS. II. 1899, LL.

funds and resources available to them at the time.³¹ At this stage Wallace was seriously considering selling the dramatic rights to his novel. After extended negotiations, Wallace agreed to a Klaw and Erlanger production of *Ben-Hur*, under the condition that Christ not be impersonated by an actor, and that the Crucifixion scene not be staged.³² In a letter to Klaw and Erlanger, Wallace anticipated the success of *Ben-Hur* to surpass that of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as a 'stage interest to go hand in hand with Christianity'.³³

Wallace closely supervised playwright William Young's adaptation of his novel into the playscript, from which the crucifixion scene was completely omitted, and Christ appears in the form of a 25,000 candlepower beam of light in the penultimate scene of the play, when Ben-Hur's mother and sister are healed from leprosy.³⁴ Actors Walker Whiteside and William S. Hart, selected by Wallace and the producers to play Ben-Hur and Messala, respectively, were known primarily as Shakespearean actors.³⁵ Exhibitors Klaw and Erlanger were eager to promote the production in advance, according to a specific strategy which they estimated would encourage the interest of more reluctant audiences, primarily Christian communities. One document reveals the exhibitors' meditation on prospective audiences' anticipations of *Ben-Hur*, and concrete plans for transforming audience expectations from anxiety to relief and enthusiasm. In April 1899, Klaw and Erlanger arranged for Wallace to be interviewed by the *New York Herald*, and to speak publicly about the play for the first time. Erlanger coaches Wallace quite specifically concerning the impression of the production they expect him to offer:

We would suggest...that in your discussion you speak particularly of your hope for a proper stage production worthy of the possibilities and dramatic grandeur of "Ben Hur"; the number of years you have refrained from allowing it;...your consent now because you believe...that the subject will be approached and treated with the reverence and dignity befitting the story. Any reference to the Crucifixion might prove an error, and we respectfully suggest that you avoid that, rather speaking of the dramatic treatment which will be given to the love story of "Ben Hur", the Galilee [sic] fight, the Chariot race, and the spectacular scenes in the Grove of Daphne which will form the basic elements of the play. Of course it will be well to impress upon them that the religious atmosphere will be preserved but that nothing will be done that would in the slightest offend that large element of Christian people whom it is our desire and ambition to attract.³⁶

³¹ This is not to mention Klaw and Erlanger's monopoly on American theatre bookings through their direction of the Theatrical Syndicate. See Wainscott (1999: 262) and Frick (1999: 212-13).

³² Contract between Lew Wallace and Klaw and Erlanger (11 April 1899). Wallace MSS. II. 1899, LL.

³³ Letter from Wallace to Klaw and Erlanger (25 March 1899). Wallace MSS. II. 1899, LL.

³⁴ Morsberger and Morsberger (1980) 457-8.

³⁵ Whiteside was replaced shortly before the debut by Edward J. Morgan, whose last major role had been the lead in the modern religious drama, *The Christian* (Morsberger and Morsberger, 1980: 459).

³⁶ Letter from Abraham Erlanger to Lew Wallace (11 April 1899). Wallace MSS. II. 1899, LL.

Klaw and Erlanger were knowledgeable of (Protestant) Christian suspicions of the theatre, and subsequently advertised *Ben-Hur* for its (universalised, non-denominational) moral benefits for Christian spectators through its teaching of ‘the love of Christ for the world, of his power to forgive, to heal, and to save’. The exhibitors promised that the play would ‘make men better’, spreading the ‘religion of kindness’ to the audience.³⁷ Yet in their advice to Wallace (quoted above), Klaw and Erlanger recommend promoting the play for its capacity to deliver spectacle, in both action scenes (the naval battle and the chariot race) and exotic atmospheric scenes (the Grove of Daphne), which are deemed the ‘basic elements of the play’. There is an acknowledgement here of habitual theatregoers’ association of toga plays³⁸ with spectacle and lavish accoutrements. On the other hand, the play is advertised as standing apart from other toga dramas of the day, due to the intimate involvement of the revered, ‘divinely-inspired’ author in the production, a relationship represented by the voice of the author in the initial promotion.

Shortly following the 29 November 1899 debut of the play, Wallace publicly expressed relief that the play did in fact protect the sanctity of the religious episodes in his novel,³⁹ and began to exhibit a new strategy for promoting the play, perhaps for the benefit of those who were not primarily concerned with the rendering of the Christian material. In a December interview with *Indianapolis News*, Wallace emphasised the grand scale of expense and research necessary for the production, including the building of a new theatre in Chicago for the purpose of staging *Ben-Hur*. Wallace also claims that extensive research was completed to ensure the authenticity of detail in the sets and the costumes, which ‘were all designed...from models obtained after careful archaeological research’.⁴⁰

The circulation of messages to potential spectators invited multiple avenues of engagement with the play, which was said to offer something for everyone—spectacle, religious affirmation, and the aesthetic meeting of art and scholarship. Yet a vital ingredient in these messages was Wallace’s relationship to the work—his long-awaited consent to the dramatisation, his assurance that the religious material would be

³⁷ Reported in Miller (forthcoming: 8, 16, 19).

³⁸ See Mayer (1994: 1-18) for background on the development of ‘toga drama’, a genre of late-nineteenth-century melodrama that featured narratives about Imperial Rome and its Judeo-Christian subjects. For discussion of influences of toga drama on the Klaw and Erlanger *Ben-Hur*, see Section 3.

³⁹ ‘Lew Wallace Pleased’ (1 December 1899). *Indianapolis News*. Papers, newspaper articles, and memorabilia related to Lew Wallace and Ben-Hur, Volume 1, 20, CDPL.

⁴⁰ ‘Gen. Wallace on Ben Hur’ (9 December 1899). *Indianapolis News*. Papers, newspaper articles, and memorabilia related to Lew Wallace and Ben-Hur, Volume 1, 21, CDPL.

reverentially communicated, and his definitive statement that *Ben-Hur* would create and sustain a collective movement of enthusiastic followers throughout the United States.

3.3. THE KLAU AND ERLANGER *BEN-HUR* (1899-1920): DYNAMICS OF EMOTION IN THE TEXT

Medium and methods

Chapter 1 explored the extent to which Wallace's historical fiction resists Walter Scott's model of the 'necessary anachronism' by maintaining an interest in the culturally, and to some extent spiritually, constructed emotions of his characters. Wallace establishes an ascending moral and quasi-ethnographic hierarchy of Romans, Jews, and proto-Christians, a hierarchy strongly defined by the correlation of emotional experience with religious practice and/or devotion. Through the journey and extraordinary circumstances of protagonist Judah Ben-Hur the reader gains access to experiences and people intimately associated with all levels of this hierarchy. Wallace constructs these circumstances in order to emphasise the final stage of the journey through this hierarchy, Ben-Hur's conversion and acceptance of Christ as a personal saviour. The epilogue of Wallace's novel demonstrates the shift in Ben-Hur's social value system and emotional behaviour at this level—donating his fortune to the Christians in Rome, and (as Esther testifies) forgiving Iras for her former allegiance to Messala and attempts to sabotage him.

An analysis of Klaw and Erlanger's *Ben-Hur* (1899-1920)⁴¹ for its potential to invite the emotional engagement of audiences must suspend readiness to apply the hierarchical model of analysis to the central workings of emotion in this play. The ethnographic hierarchy of morality and emotion is still present, and Wallace's dialogue is borrowed heavily in scenes where characters make decisions and justify their emotional behaviour on the basis of religious (or irreligious) beliefs and experience. Chief examples of this include Messala's reasoning behind his maxim, 'Down Eros, Up Mars!' (Young, 210, Wallace, 84-5), Ben-Hur's conviction to serve the Messiah in an army against Rome (Young, 212-3, Wallace, 106), and Quintus Arrius' code of piety and service to the state, on behalf of which he is willing to die by his own hand (Young, 219, 225; Wallace, 130, 156).⁴²

⁴¹ William Young's script is reproduced in David Mayer's *Playing Out Empire* (1994). All citations of the script will be cited as Young, with page numbers from Mayer (1994).

⁴² Other instances include: Arrius' questioning of the origin of the slave Ben-Hur's misfortunes; Simonides' difficult revelation of his and Esthers' identities as slaves to the Hur family, initially to Esther

Yet, Ben-Hur does not manifest ascendancy through this hierarchy as he does in the novel, which creates a problem for the application of this interpretation to the stageplay. Due to the economical organisation of the story into a prelude and six acts, the lack of theological reflection Ben-Hur exhibits apart from punctuated asides,⁴³ and the significant changes made to the Christ episodes from Wallace's story (particularly in the sixth act), Ben-Hur's procession through this hierarchy and the psychological changes that transpire as a result do not come through in the play very clearly. The play's consistent, fairly quiet obfuscation of Ben-Hur's conversion to Christianity is one of the most significant points of departure from Wallace's narrative, and renders the hierarchical model of emotion, religion, and ethnography not wholly appropriate. This crucial insertion of narrative ambiguity may, from a narratological point of view, seem problematic within melodrama, a chief characteristic of which is clarity and reassertion of moral imperative and narrative direction,⁴⁴ a characteristic that is emphasised elsewhere in the Klaw and Erlanger *Ben-Hur*. For instance, Young ubiquitously plays up the Ben-Hur/Esther dynamic of 'will they, or won't they?' that hinges on Ben-Hur's reconciliation with his core moral values after unsuccessfully attempting to project them onto Iras. He also enhances the rivalry between Ben-Hur and Messala in every aspect—at the time of the chariot race, both are Roman soldiers⁴⁵ and accomplished charioteers, and both are in competition for Iras' affection.

While Ben-Hur gains greater intimacy with Christ throughout the play, at several crucial points he resists, or simply does not understand, the particular message of *spiritual* salvation he receives from Christ in the novel, and this is not resolved by the end of the play. Ben-Hur's unclear conversion experience was not read as problematic by many viewers, particularly those who reported experiences of spiritual fulfilment in their encounter with the staged religious episodes. Those familiar with Wallace's novel may have understood the eventuality of Ben-Hur's conversion at the Crucifixion, and been satisfied with the ending as it was, with the healing of the lepers. Others may not have noticed this ambiguity, because they were invested in the multi-sensory experience created by the non-verbal language of melodrama.

and later to Ben-Hur; and the erotically charged conversation between Ben-Hur and Iras about the nature of love by the lake near the Sheik's tent.

⁴³ Through asides, melodramatic characters 'repeatedly announce their identities, feelings, and intentions' (Williams, 2012: 207).

⁴⁴ Brooks (1995) 56.

⁴⁵ In the novel, Ben-Hur wears a 'linen robe' on his journey to Antioch, and reveals himself to Simonides as Judah Ben-Hur upon meeting him (Wallace, 161, 170). In the play, Ben-Hur comes to Simonides' house in military dress, introduces himself as Arrius the Younger, and later in the conversation ventures to disclose his true identity.

The interaction between pictorialism, music (variable in its capacities for intense centrality and unobtrusive commentary),⁴⁶ *tableaux*, action, and speech characteristic of melodrama as a mode of performance present for the audience a dynamic, synaesthetic experience of a narrative.⁴⁷ The narrative structure in melodrama is defined to a large extent by the collective influence of visual and aural stimuli to create a rhythm of affective experience, punctuated by variations in type and intensity of emotion. The audience is invited to participate in this rhythm by following the emotionally evocative gestural and speech patterns of the actors,⁴⁸ and by witnessing striking changes in aesthetic atmosphere (such as a change from movement to static *tableaux*, a shift from speech to pantomime, or a change in a musical number or *leitmotif* suggestive of a character or event). Within the mode of late nineteenth-century/early twentieth-century American melodrama, *Ben-Hur* operates within the ‘toga drama’ genre,⁴⁹ whose plays generally feature tales of struggle of non-denominational Christians under the ideologically and politically oppressive, decadent and militaristic Roman Empire. Toga plays explore social and political tensions surrounding circulating ideologies of gender, empire, and morality in Anglo-American society, by featuring a virtuous, Christian heroine with whom a wealthy and powerful Roman hero falls in love before he renounces his morally reprehensible lifestyle and converts to Christianity.⁵⁰

As David Mayer has highlighted, Klaw and Erlanger’s *Ben-Hur* employs and at times challenges the conventions of this genre by ‘address[ing] American perceptions and problems’ in alignment with the thematic function of Wallace’s novel.⁵¹ Most notably, the play features a Jewish male protagonist, whose shifting social identity occurs within provincial spaces of the Empire which are not as culturally polarised as the Rome of other toga dramas. Also, *Ben-Hur* does not have a conventionally melodramatic ending with the defeat of the villain.⁵² The play continues for another act after Messala’s humiliating loss in the chariot race in order to resolve the remaining pieces of the melodramatic plotline, namely the pairing of Ben-Hur with his rightful

⁴⁶ See Pisani’s (2014) introduction for background on the types of musical accompaniment commonly used in nineteenth-century melodrama in Britain and the United States.

⁴⁷ Williams (2012: 193) writes, ‘...melodrama is an organized audio-visual field, dialectically working back and forth between music and pictures, music and speech, movement and stasis, sound and silence’.

⁴⁸ In the case of *tableaux*, gesture was often coded according to the specific emotion it was intended to represent. Robinson (2010: 32) explains that acting manuals were widely read among American thespians in the nineteenth century working in *tableaux* performance.

⁴⁹ Identified in Mayer (1994), Richards (2009), and Barrow (2010).

⁵⁰ W.G. Wills’ and Henry Herman’s *Claudian* (1883) and Wilson Barrett’s *The Sign of the Cross* (1895) are emblematic of this.

⁵¹ Mayer (1994) 189.

⁵² Ibid, 192.

love interest, the pure, unsophisticated, ingénue Esther, and the reunion of Ben-Hur with his family, healed from leprosy by Christ.

The *Ben-Hur* play adheres to melodramatic conventions through its presentation of a clear moral lesson with contemporary applications: the triumph of compassion, generosity, and religious feeling; active resistance to carnal temptation; and the preservation of the dignity and integrity of the family in the midst of a changing social and political climate whose potential dangers of increased urbanisation, multiculturalism, and revision of social relationships between men and women threatens to compromise the innocence of the individual. Peter Brooks has observed that the unequivocal morality of melodrama, reasserted throughout a play in response to ‘repeated obfuscations and refusals of the message’, and consistently reinforced through the emotionally charged interaction of speech, movement, and music, indicates ‘a struggle toward recognition of the sign of virtue and innocence’.⁵³ He emphasises the continued interaction of verbal and non-verbal modes of expression melodrama employs to explore moral polarities. In the dramatic version of *Ben-Hur*, this is particularly apparent in the interaction between characters and the aesthetic environment.

Klaw and Erlanger’s *Ben-Hur* spatially segments Wallace’s novel into scenes whose emotional tone and thematic focus are framed by the aesthetics of the space established on the stage, aesthetics which colour the operation and interaction of characters within that space. The nature of the select physical environments from Wallace’s novel which the playwright chose to represent onstage largely conforms to the conventions of toga drama, and melodrama more generally. The establishment of the opening domestic scene of the Hur home as the site for the initial recognition of the protagonist’s innocence and integrity, followed by the villain’s intrusion and violation of the moral sanctity of this space, recalls the general conflict set-up of domestic melodrama.⁵⁴ The vivid, at times hedonistic spectacle of the Grove of Daphne and the chariot race is symptomatic of the integration of Victorian paintings of antiquity into set design for toga plays.⁵⁵ These sequences also adhere to the general participation of toga plays within the efforts of mass entertainment at the end of the nineteenth century to

⁵³ Brooks (1995) 28.

⁵⁴ Discussed in Vicinus (1989).

⁵⁵ Barrow (2010: 218, 226); Dunant (1994: 82-3).

engage Anglo-American spectators' growing willingness to indulge in enjoyment of Roman-themed popular art forms.⁵⁶

The ethereal pictorialism of the religious episodes in the prelude (the Magi following the Christmas star in pantomime) and in the closing of the play (the healing of the lepers on Mount Olivet) would have been rather unusual for American audiences during this period, when toga dramas with Christian conversion narratives did not have any role for Christ (*The Last Days of Pompeii* and *The Sign of the Cross* for instance). Christ's corporeal representation in performing arts seems to have been limited to slide shows and early films documenting the Bavarian Passion Plays of Oberammergau, and was viewed by American Christians with a mixture of curious fascination with the exotic religious practices of European Catholics, and self-reported experiences of spiritual devotion.⁵⁷ In the Klaw and Erlanger *Ben-Hur*, the supernatural qualities of Christ as the 'light of the world'—the star guiding the Magi to the offstage Nativity in the prelude, and the healing light that shines on the lepers at the end of Act VI—are represented onstage, while his human qualities and physical characteristics are reported.

The six-act structure of the play ensures that certain elements of Wallace's plotline are emphasised, while others are downplayed or omitted. Audiences in the United States and Britain would have received a list of acts and scene titles from the play (some of which are accompanied by quotations from the novel) in their programmes.⁵⁸ Those familiar with the novel would of course have picked up on the omission of the beginning Nativity sequence, and the abrupt ending with the healing of the lepers and the reunion of the Hur family. They may have noted also the omission of other scenes from the novel, such as the Roman orgy prior to the chariot race, the attempted assassination of Ben-Hur at the Palace of Idernee (ordered by Messala with Iras' cooperation), and the battle between the Galileans, led by Ben-Hur, and the Romans in Jerusalem. In the course of viewing the play, audiences would have come to understand the playwright's privileging of the multi-sensory manifestation of aesthetic atmospheres, such as the Grove of Daphne, the circus at Antioch, or Mount Olivet. Acting, costume, choreography, musical accompaniment, lighting, set design, including notable technological features, and the narrative structuring of *Ben-Hur* into a six-act

⁵⁶ Malamud (2009) 165-79. In London from the 1880s onward, spectacular melodrama was rapidly gaining popularity, albeit some disdain from critics opining that the grandiose sets took precedence over the acting (Booth, 1981: 74), lowering the cultural register of this type of drama from the realm of 'high art' (Stottlar, 1989: 214). Much of this melodrama was staged under the management of Augustus Harris and later Arthur Collins at Drury Lane, where the Klaw and Erlanger *Ben-Hur* would travel in 1902.

⁵⁷ Fox (2004) 308.

⁵⁸ Mayer (1994: 195-200) has reproduced the 1899 New York and 1902 London programmes. The name of the set designer is listed alongside each scene.

drama are all elements to be considered in balance when analysing this performed text of the novel.

Although it will not be nearly as fruitful for us to apply the moral/ethnographic/emotional hierarchy to the characters in the Klaw and Erlanger play, as melodrama it does endeavour to express the emotional tone of the story through the characters. Melodrama invites the audience's access to, and/or sympathy with the emotional experiences of the characters through gesture, musical accompaniment and 'aside' speech perceptible only to the audience, and dialogue with other characters. As Michael Pisani observes, in the last few decades of the nineteenth century, many theatre companies specialising in melodrama were transitioning from conventions of populating their plays with stock characters to a promotion of stars associated with onstage personae.⁵⁹ Young arguably re-illustrates characters in *Ben-Hur* so that they lose some of their psychological idiosyncracies attributed to them by Wallace, and operate in greater alignment with models of stock characters from toga drama.⁶⁰ However, as Section 4 of this chapter will demonstrate, over the play's twenty-one-year run there developed a growing interest in the stars embodying certain onstage roles.

Several themes such as love and sexuality, the loss and redemption of innocence, or the tension between Ben-Hur's (and the viewer's) proximity to and distance from Christ, can be traced with attention to their capacity to represent emotions and invite audiences' emotional responses. Analysis of the play in this chapter will adhere to a scheme that touches upon all of these themes and their implications for character and plot development to some extent, but prioritises the interrogation of the authorial agency and semiotic language of the medium and the genre. General questions regarding the relationships between verbal and nonverbal modes of expression in melodrama have a fairly strong precedent in scholarship, and discussions of their influence on representations of emotion and invitations for spectators' affective engagement with the onstage scenario is often implicated.⁶¹ A methodological approach that works to evaluate the dynamics of the verbal, and the non-verbal (images, movement, and sound) is particularly appropriate to apply to *Ben-Hur* as an adaptation

⁵⁹ Pisani (2014: xxv). See also Mayer's (2009: 38) allusion to this trend more generally among 'combination', or travelling theatre companies with a consistent acting ensemble and set pieces.

⁶⁰ Identified in Mayer (1994: 2-6; see 14-15 for female stock characters).

⁶¹ Brooks (1995, especially 56-80); Dunant (1994: 83-4). Pisani (2014: xi) points out that the essential definition of melodrama is the pairing of stage action or dialogue with music, and throughout his book he discusses the interaction between music and pantomime, music and action, and music and speech in nineteenth-century melodrama. See Pisani (2014: 10-12) or Dyer (1998: 137-8) for discussion of nineteenth-century discourse surrounding the pairing of melodramatic gestures (and, in Pisani, music) with specific emotions. See Barrow (2010: 226) for these questions applied to toga drama.

of a novel, since it seeks to understand the adaptation of a literary form into a performed text containing a variety of aural and visual media. Some scholarship has previously explored English historical novelists' borrowings from the narrative conventions of melodrama as a medium which 'humanises history'.⁶² Although Wallace did not originally intend for his novel to be performed, his clear derivation of narrative style from the English historical novel invites the question of the extent to which Wallace's novel, as some contemporary theatre professionals presumed, contains narrative formulae similar to those of melodrama.

The following close reading of passages from selected scenes from *Ben-Hur* (including the Prelude, the condemnation of the Hur family (Act I), the Galley (Act II), the Grove of Daphne (Act III), the tent of Sheik Ilderim and the Orchard of Palms (Act IV), the Circus (Act V), and the Hur Home in Jerusalem and Vale of Hinnom/Mount Olivet (Act VI)) will explore four major dynamics of words and wordlessness that are particularly apparent in these scenes:

1. *Tableaux, pantomime, spectacle, and the immediacy of emotion.* This draws from Caroline Dunant's idea that the punctuated pictorialism of the *tableaux* functions 'as the climax of gestural action, [and] brings the planes of actuality and signification together, provoking immediate emotional involvement'.⁶³ Inclusion of spectacle in this category acknowledges contemporary associations of pantomime with spectacular melodrama.⁶⁴

2. *Music and the mystique of the 'other'.* In *Ben-Hur*, music, and especially song, is often used to mediate the audience's relationship with characters and spaces associated with the ethnic 'other', embodied particularly in Egyptian Iras and the Arab Sheik Ilderim. Music invites the audience's curiosity to venture into the immersive, aesthetically sophisticated realm of the foreigner, and to explore the alternative physical spaces inhabited by the 'other', leaving behind the familiar, domestic spaces dominated by the dialogue of morally unambiguous protagonists.

3. *Reported actions/speech and the distance of the spectator.* This is particularly prominent in scenes where Christ's human characteristics are described, and the spectator is invited to respond affectively without witnessing the physical appearance of Christ.

⁶² Dunant (1994) 85. See also Williams (2012) 216-17.

⁶³ Dunant (1994) 83.

⁶⁴ Stottlar (1989) 223.

4. *The synaesthesia of Christ's Word*. When Christ speaks, the word becomes the Word, and the Word takes aural and visual form simultaneously.

Although these four patterns recur throughout the play, and may sometimes overlap in the same dramatic scenario, they are listed in the order in which the spectator of *Ben-Hur* encounters each of them for the first time, relative to one another. The operation of (1) and (2) applies to dramatic strategies of melodrama of this period more generally, whereas (3) and (4) represent particular issues of words and wordlessness related to the Christ scenarios in the play, the inclusion of which naturally distinguishes *Ben-Hur* from other melodramas, and even toga dramas, of this time.

The following source materials allow a limited reconstruction of the scenes featured in the analysis: Young's original 1899 script; a 1902 edition of Edgar Stillman Kelley's score, published by Towers and Curran, New York;⁶⁵ and Joseph Byron's illustrations from flash-light photographs of the play, from Klaw and Erlanger's 'Souvenir Album: Scenes from the Play *Ben-Hur*' (1900). Where appropriate, these sources will be supplemented with information about the production provided by newspapers and other contemporary publications. The script offers limited descriptions of staging, and many detailed directions for acting, and the photographs reproduced in the souvenir album provide visual representations of the emotional 'high points' of the melodrama, but the relatively fragmented state of this melodrama challenges our ability to achieve a comprehensive understanding of how the play functioned as a holistic merging of various aesthetic stimuli. Although this analysis endeavours to explore emotions communicated to the audience through the wide variety of expressionistic avenues the medium offers, some of these avenues have survived more completely than others, and consequently may take greater precedence over others in the discussion. Specific actors are not discussed in this analysis, due to personnel changes throughout the stageplay's twenty-one-year run. The reception of stars in specific roles will be discussed in Section 4 of this chapter, which evaluates audience responses. The photographs in the souvenir album are taken from the Broadway run and feature the original cast, with the exception of two images,⁶⁶ which appear to depict actor Walter

⁶⁵ This edition, published for piano and voice, is available via the Internet Archive: <https://archive.org/details/wordsmusicofklaw00kell> (Accessed 9 December 2015). Jon Solomon (2012) uses this as the primary source for the score, although a full orchestral manuscript version is located at the Library of Congress (I have not been able to access it for the purposes of this current project).

⁶⁶ Namely, Messala's condemnation of the Hur family in the Hur palace (Fig. 3.2), and the meeting of Ben-Hur with Iras and Balthasar by the Fountain for Castalia, which does not appear in this analysis.

Whiteside as Ben-Hur, while Edward J. Morgan, who replaced Whiteside just prior to the premiere, appears in all of the other photographs.

Analysis of emotions in the text

In Young's script the first element to set the scene for the Prelude is 'music composed for the meeting of the Three Wise Men in the desert [taking] the place of the conventional orchestral prelude'. From the initial bars of the opening musical number, the audience's attention is directed to this melodrama's singularity—its aesthetic departure from the medium due to the opening religious sequence. The musical intro is followed by the raising of the house drop to reveal a gauze drop, with backing. The script then introduces 'the chorus...behind the curtain. Another interval, of not more than a minute, filled with music. The backing to gauze drop will then ascend, showing view of desert' (Young, 204). The gauze drop creates a dreamlike film through which the audience glimpses the meeting of the Magi in pantomime, and the Christmas star, whose appearance and growing radiance comes to dominate the final *tableau* of the Prelude. The opening lyrics to the choral piece are meant to be sung by only a few voices from the choir: 'The vision of Isaiah, the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem' (Kelley, 2). The full choir⁶⁷ joins in for the next phrase, loudly:

Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the Lord hath spoken, Hear for the Lord hath spoken, [crescendo] Arise! Shine! For thy light is come and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. For behold the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people. But the Lord shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee, And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and Kings to the brightness of thy rising, thy rising (Kelley, 3-5).

The passage above is Isaiah 60.1-3 set to music, communicating the Old Testament prophecy that anticipates the coming of the Christmas star, and its impact on the people of Judaea. The words of the unseen chorus have a disembodied, supernatural quality. The pantomime following the ascension of the backing of the gauze drop depicts the entrance of Gaspar the Greek Magus on a camel, and his greeting of Balthasar and Melchior, who are already onstage. Kelley composed the instrumental accompaniment for this by drawing upon his academic study of ancient Near-Eastern music, incorporating scales he associated with 'Semitic' peoples, and creating an atmosphere of antiquated Orientalism to capture the biblical Near East.⁶⁸ Once Gaspar dismounts, the men turn towards the back of the stage, and fall to their knees. The star appears

⁶⁷ Depending on the size of the stage, this consisted of as many as 150 members ('Academy of Music' (2 March 1907). *New Rochelle Star*. *Ben-Hur* Scrapbook, NYPL).

⁶⁸ Solomon (2012) 175. See Ziter (2003, 131-63) for a discussion of the multi-sensory reconstruction of biblical landmarks and ethnographic dioramas of the Holy Land in nineteenth-century British performance.

overhead, growing brighter until ‘the entire sky becomes illuminated [and] the music reaches its culmination’ (Young, 204) (Fig. 3.1).



Fig. 3.1: The star appears to the Magi (*Ben-Hur* Souvenir Album, 1900)

Although the published score discussed here is for voice and piano, it indicates a rising scale on the flute, accompanied by soft, mellow strings. The backstories and onstage interactions of the Magi, unnamed and voiceless, are downplayed. Their costumes are ‘appropriate’ to their ethnic identities as ‘Greek’, ‘Egyptian’, and ‘Hindu’, so that their characters are recognisable to readers of Wallace’s novel. The coordinated, multi-sensory shift from pantomime to *tableau*, from dimness to complete illumination of the sky in the backdrop, and from one musical theme to another (the atmospheric ‘Approach of the Magi’ becomes the majestic, reverential ‘Star in the East’) invites the audience to experience the immediate mood of the scene, and its changes. The only words provided in this sequence are scripture, delivered through song, giving the impression that the theatre has become a church, and the audience the congregation. The audience is also witness to, although physically distanced (by means of the gauze drop) from the appearance of the Christmas star. The simultaneous visual and aural representation of Christ’s divinity is introduced for the first time, and with the ending of this scene and the opening of Act I, when the audience is plunged into the melodramatic plotline, Christ’s human incarnation (the Nativity) remains beyond the audience’s perception.

Act I, which includes Ben-Hur’s meeting and falling out with Messala, the accident, and Messala’s condemnation of the Hur family, takes place entirely within the rooftop apartment at the palace of Hur. The audience is invited to appreciate the

function of the domestic setting for the falling out and the ultimate betrayal as, in the tradition of domestic melodrama, heightening the emotional impact of the villain's intrusion, and imposition of conflict on the former safety and innocence of the family sphere.⁶⁹ At the end of Act I, after a piece of the wall (a slight diversion from the novel here) collapses (offstage) onto Gratus, there emerges an important instance of the reinforcement of dialogue by non-verbal forms of expression. This culminates in a coordination of expressive stimuli in order to signal a point of acute emotional intensity. Ben-Hur's high level of anxiety and despair in anticipation of the accident's consequences is thrust upon the audience. When his mother enters the scene, Ben-Hur points to the ruined wall, and the music, previously unobtrusive, reaches crescendo at Ben-Hur's line, written in the score, 'Misfortune! Ruin! I have brought them upon thee' (Kelley, 11). Stage directions indicate the rapid approach of the Romans ([*commotion without increases. Trampling on stairway*]) (Young, 215), increasing the momentary suspense.

The scene becomes much more physical from this point onwards, with Messala and a group of centurions entering to seize the Hur family; directions for the choreographed struggle between the Hur family and the soldiers are interspersed with the dialogue, which consists of the family's appeals to Messala's mercy (Young, 215). Messala, standing slightly downstage from the others, turns away (Fig. 3.2), physically indicating his character's unwillingness to yield to Ben-Hur's appeal to his sense of familial piety, 'Oh, in the name of thine own mother...' (216). Ben-Hur's open hand clearly indicates Messala (Fig. 3.2), matching the sign for 'energetic appeal' Richard Dyer cites from Delsarte's coding of conventional melodramatic gestures corresponding to emotional expression.⁷⁰ The scene ends with Ben-Hur falling to his knees, his eyes raised to the sky, crying out as he does in the novel, 'O Lord, in the hour of thy vengeance, mine be the hand to put it upon him!' (Young, 216).⁷¹ At this point the music picks up again, and rapidly, before the curtain falls (Kelley, 12).

⁶⁹ See Vicinus (1989) for a discussion of this dynamic.

⁷⁰ Dyer (1998) 138.

⁷¹ From Wallace, 116.



Fig. 3.2: The condemnation of the Hur family (*Ben-Hur* Souvenir Album, 1900)

In Act II, Scene 1, the slave galley, the set design for which is described in Young (217) (depicted in Fig. 3.3), emerges as a space of clear physical and psychological oppression. The set employs deep staging techniques,⁷² such as the diagonal angling of the scaffolding with the rowers along the walls, the diagonal placement of the staircases leading up to the dais in the centre background, and the gradual dropping of the ceiling from foreground to background. At the same time as the space seems larger from the spectator's perspective, its claustrophobic quality emphasised by the barred windows in the ceiling, through which no light shines (it is a night scene), and the dim lighting cast by the lanterns in the background. Rowers are crammed together into the scaffolding (particularly at stage left), and are dressed in short tunics, their wrists, ankles and chests bound by restrictive-looking black leather. The music replicates the solemn rhythm with which the *hortator* determines the synchronicity of the rowers.⁷³ At centre stage stands tribune Quintus Arrius. Wallace's complex portrayal of Arrius' internal meditations on his identity as a Roman with virtuous Republican, as opposed to decadent and irreverent Imperial, leanings, is fundamentally simplified in Young's script. Young places greater emphasis on physical attributes to indicate Arrius' function within the morally unambiguous melodrama.⁷⁴ Arrius appears in military dress, but he is bareheaded,

⁷² Deep staging techniques for interior sets come to be used in early narrative cinema by filmmakers with background in theatre, such as D.W. Griffith (Mayer, 2009: 91).

⁷³ Solomon (2012) 175. During the naval battle at the end of this scene, the offstage sounds of the galley ramming a pirate ship are coordinated with the choreographed movements of the slaves and soldiers inside the galley, who sway or fall over on the spot as a result of the impact (Young, 222).

⁷⁴ This resembles Nikolopoulou's (1996: 132) observation that the melodramatic adaptations of Walter Scott's historical novels in the early nineteenth century tend to 'foreg[o] a degree of psychological analysis in favor of an intensification of the representation of the material conditions in which the

willing to relinquish militaristic callousness, in contrast to Messala (Fig. 3.2), who wears his helmet in a domestic space. Arrius' posture is open, gazing down at Ben-Hur, who assumes the position of 'earnest entreaty',⁷⁵ beseeching Arrius to grant him details of the whereabouts of his missing family (Young, 220).



Fig. 3.3: The slave galley (*Ben-Hur* Souvenir Album, 1900)

During the extended dialogue between Ben-Hur and Arrius, the character of Christ enters the scene through the interaction between verbal and non-verbal cues. When Ben-Hur defends his innocence to Arrius, he describes the 'one measure of human kindness' he received in the past three years: 'One only—a boy, by a well, blessed me, and gave me a draught of water. How beautiful his face! With what light of heaven his eyes shone. His voice trembled with infinite mercy' (220). Although there are no stage directions here for vocal inflection or body language, the score uses this line as a cue for the re-emergence of the *leitmotif* from the Prelude (Kelley, 15), known as 'This is Jesus of Nazareth', which also accompanies the appearance of the light of Christ during the healing of the lepers in Act VI.⁷⁶ The musical motif is meant to be played very softly, inviting the audience's gentle recollection of the intimate, multi-sensory experience of the opening pantomime and *tableau* of the Prelude, characterised in large part by the musical theme, which was initially reverential, joyous, and exalted. This characteristic

characters operate'. The paradoxical placement of Arrius' clemency within a space of confinement is at greater issue here.

⁷⁵ Dyer (1998) 138.

⁷⁶ Solomon (2012) 176.

musical motif,⁷⁷ meant elsewhere to correspond with the (admittedly disembodied) appearance of Christ onstage, indicates Ben-Hur's reflection upon the *human* capacity for compassion demonstrated by Christ (whom Ben-Hur knows as an unnamed boy in Nazareth).

The music invites the audience to access Ben-Hur's vivid re-experience of the initial sense of reverence felt at this meeting ('a boy...*blessed me*....with what *light of heaven* his eyes shone'), and simultaneously receive knowledge beyond that of the protagonist—to know that Ben-Hur inadvertently encountered the prophesied 'light' from the Prelude.⁷⁸ Additionally, there is an association, and inherent tension, between the reported quality of Christ's voice ('his voice trembled with infinite mercy') and Christ's capacity to illuminate, representing the balance between Christ's corporeality and divinity. Ben-Hur, through his reported meetings with Christ, functions as the audience's access point for Christ's humanness, and reinforces the separation between the audience and a physical representation of Christ onstage. Yet, the delicate promise of spiritual absolution within an atmosphere of suffering and imminent danger (manifested in the sea battle with the pirates) invites the spectator to anticipate a resolution of this distance from Christ later in the play.

The featured scenic environment in Act III is the Grove of Daphne, which encapsulates Scenes 2-4, and which carries in comparison with Scene 1, the dialogue-centred encounter between Ben-Hur, Simonides, and Esther at the home of Simonides, a highly dynamic interaction between verbal and non-verbal modes of expression. In the Grove of Daphne, Ben-Hur encounters Simonides' servant Malluch, Iras, Balthasar, Messala, and Ilderim at various points. These interactions among the principal characters are mediated by spectacle, a continuous song and dance number performed by a chorus dressed as members of a ritual procession—young male and female devotees, priests of Apollo, and 'Devadasi', Wallace's ethnographically inappropriate term for temple-dancers⁷⁹—whom Ben-Hur and Malluch follow to the Temple of Apollo, and encounter later at the Fountain of Castalia near the charioteers' practice

⁷⁷ Pisani (2014: xv-xvi) defines the nineteenth-century term 'characteristic music' as music associated with a particular character and 'attempted a literal embodiment of an actor's physical demeanor...or ethos'. While this label may not be strictly applicable to this circumstance, since Christ is never physically manifest onstage, that is the closest conventional melodramatic function of this musical passage.

⁷⁸ The music thus stands in for Wallace's line, 'And so, for the first time, Judah and the son of Mary met and parted' (Wallace, 121).

⁷⁹ Mayer (1994: 238, note 81) explains this word's rightful definition—female dancers and celebrants of a Hindu god. The temple-dancers in the Grove of Daphne sequence were allegedly trained in Klaw and Erlanger's school and performed a ballet routine ('"Ben Hur" Now Playing a Two Weeks Engagement [sic] in Philadelphia' (undated, although post-1902, given references to Drury Lane run). *Ben-Hur* Scrapbook, NYPL).

grounds. Jon Solomon describes Kelley's incorporation of knowledge of ancient Greek musical motifs to create a seemingly authentic, antique and orientalised aural atmosphere for the Grove.⁸⁰ Details of the set design do not appear in the script, although a Son of Hur (of the Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur) provides a fairly comprehensive description in his account of the 1899 debut performance at the Broadway Theater in New York: 'Two hundred and sixty chorus girls of almost all ages, in modest dress...marched in and about the garden which was thickly set with trees covered with exquisite foliage and blooming vines, together with the undulation of the ground enabling them to appear and reappear until you were ready to believe there were a thousand of them...'.⁸¹ The audience is thereby invited to explore an environment characterised by a clear association between aesthetic pleasure, natural beauty, and ritual. Supernumeraries fill the stage, suggesting an association between excess and paganism. This staging motif was used in contemporary British productions, intended to encourage audiences' reflection upon the circulating narrative of the decline and fall of Greek and Roman civilisation, caused allegedly by a combination of decay in morality due to the absence of Christianity, and the insidious influence of Eastern luxury.⁸² Within this realm is featured a thematic focus on the gradual process of sexual awakening, played out in pantomime in front of the Temple of Apollo in Scene III, by a young couple subtly re-enacting the Daphne/Apollo myth (Fig. 3.4).



Fig. 3.4: The wedding party prepares to enter the Temple of Apollo (*Ben-Hur* Souvenir Album, 1900)

⁸⁰ Solomon (2012) 175.

⁸¹ John C. Wingate (1899), reproduced in Morsberger and Morsberger (1980: 461).

⁸² See Ziter (2003: 142-5) for examples.

The young woman reluctantly follows her partner toward the Temple, and then begins to run away. However, this would-be Daphne/Apollo narrative is denied its Ovidian resolution. The maiden is approached by a boy dressed as Eros (centre right in Fig. 3.4), who influences her to consent to the youth's advances. Then, with the notable insertion of Victorian morality (namely the suggestion that marriage precedes sexual union), the group enters the Temple (exiting the stage) for the marriage ceremony (Young, 239). The revellers and featured couple re-emerge in front of the Fountain in Scene 4, when the chorus clarifies that the two have been married, although 'Not by Hymen are ye wed, / But by Eros, god of Pleasure'. Only after the wedding does the young woman in pantomime join '[with the youth at last in the wild abandon of the dance which follows]' (Young, 240). The audience is invited to follow this charming vignette, and to take an interest in the 'otherness' of the pagan ritual which includes a recognisable mythological reenactment, and celebrates physical pleasure and initiation into sexual maturity.⁸³

Although this scene does not appear in Wallace, it has a notable parallel in the novel, when Ben-Hur explores the Grove and finds a young couple in the midst of what David Mayer identifies as a 'post-coital stupor' on a tiger skin beneath a statue of Daphne.⁸⁴ His response to this sight forces him to reconcile his awakening sexual desire with his religious sensibilities, which can be read according to Wallace's capitalisation of 'Law' (used to refer to Mosaic Law elsewhere in the novel): 'The exposure startled him. Back in the hush of the perfumed thicket he discovered, as he thought, that the charm of the great Grove was peace without fear...; now, in this sleep in the day's broad glare... The law of the place was Love, but Love without Law' (Wallace, 192-3). In Scene 3, when Ben-Hur watches the wedding party disappear into the Temple, he imposes a different psychological barrier, when he chastises himself for his willingness to experience the pleasure of his surroundings while his family is lost (Young, 239).

Ben-Hur's extended encounter with the chorus naturally anticipates his meeting with Iras, and introduces the theme of temptation that plagues him as he experiments with his romantic pursuit of Iras, whose coyness he repeatedly misinterprets as modesty. As the Act progresses, the dancing of the chorus members becomes more 'wild', creating suspense, and instructing the audience to anticipate the next melodramatic wave of emotional intensity, namely the encounter between Ben-Hur, Messala, and Iras at the Fountain. There is even a point when revelling chorus members are nearly run

⁸³ The American preoccupation with the 'authentic' representation of ancient 'oriental' dance as ritual, through the borrowing of models from ancient archaeological sources, is discussed in Mayer (2009: 174).

⁸⁴ Mayer (forthcoming) 14.

down by Messala's chariot (243). The chorus performs featured passages at various points throughout the dialogue between Ben-Hur, Messala, Iras, Balthasar, and Ilderim beside the Fountain, and the sung words become increasingly relevant to the interactions of the principal characters onstage. This culminates in the final choral number, 'The Spinning of Arachne', which is sung just after Ben-Hur has agreed to join Iras and Balthasar in the Sheik's tent, while the dance rages on in the background. The lyrics deliver an ominous message concerning the volatile fate of Ben-Hur's emotions ('gladness and madness and woe...burning madness and freezing woe / tempest and frost and fire') in the course of his unfulfilled affection for Iras, which amounts to a 'love, that liveth a night and a day' (247). The juxtaposition of the figure of Arachne (and the suggestion of her weaving competition with Athena) with the Daphne and Apollo story is arguably representative of the additional element of the contest between Ben-Hur and Messala in their amorous pursuits of her. Although the characters onstage are aware of and to some extent interact with the chorus, they do not perceive, as the audience might, the hermeneutic function of the songs. The singing enchants the orientalist, exotic space onstage, illuminates the emotional dynamics of the principal characters, and provides emotional commentary on the melodramatic situation.

Act IV features a similar pairing of domestic and outdoor sets to that seen in Act III. The transition music before the curtain rise is lively and pleasant, with a pastoral quality appropriate to the change of scene from the city to the Orchard of Palms outside Antioch. The curtain rises over the interior of the Sheik's tent, an elaborately decorated space, well furnished with 'rugs, divans, and other suitable furniture', and with 'glimpses...of other compartments' (249). A group of female slaves populates the scene along with Ilderim, Balthasar, and Iras, all of whom face the raised tent-flap in the background, presumably watching Ben-Hur train the horses in preparation for the race. This visually coded seat of Arab splendour offers a level of aesthetically pleasing exoticism, but is also clearly defined, with respect to its hermeneutic function in the plot progression, as a domestic space of moral rectitude that is equivalent to the Hur palace or the House of Simonides. The missionary influence of Ilderim's guest, proto-Christian pilgrim and Magus Balthasar, is one indicator, but more prominently it is the intrusion of Drusus, a Roman agent of Messala's, into this space that explicitly characterises the function of the Sheik's tent.

Drusus' entrance into the scene introduces a noteworthy departure from Wallace. Drusus gives to Iras, in the presence of Ben-Hur and Ilderim, a scarlet ribbon, Messala's colours to wear at the chariot race the next day. The ribbon stands as a

physical representation of Iras' ability to manipulate Ben-Hur's emotions, and define herself as another term of the contest between him and Messala. Through the language of costume and changing colours, Iras signifies her social independence and her seductive power. Esther and Simonides join the group in the Sheik's tent, and the contrast between the influences of Esther and Iras over Ben-Hur's feelings, and the moral consequences of Ben-Hur's affinity with either one of the women, is foregrounded. When Simonides and Esther are revealed to be slaves of Ben-Hur, Esther refuses to be freed by her master Ben-Hur if Simonides remains bound by the 'law of Moses' to be a slave. This dialogue between Esther and Ben-Hur is laden with directions for acting ('[*slowly and with emotion...with a burst of emotion...struggling with emotion...*']') that traces the emotional patterns of this exchange, and reinforces the difficulty of Esther's resistance in the name of self-sacrifice (258-9). In this scene, and previously in Act III, when she convinces her father that they must admit their condition of slavery to Ben-Hur, Esther thus represents the 'arbiter of morality' paradigm, associated with a retreat to the realm of domesticity, and exhibits a strong respect for a patriarch's determination of her social role.⁸⁵

Audiences familiar with other toga dramas at the end of the nineteenth century may have drawn a parallel between Esther's adamant adherence to her father's fate prescribed by Mosaic law, and the ultimate act of self-sacrifice displayed by Mercia from Wilson Barrett's *The Sign of the Cross* (performed in the United States in 1895).⁸⁶ Mercia chooses death in Nero's arena rather than to '...deny Him who died for me'.⁸⁷ Although Barrett himself claimed that his characterisation of Mercia was meant to provide an alternative to the morally ambiguous, provocative female leads signalling their independence through divorce in contemporary 'Society Dramas', David Mayer has commented that the consequential influence of Mercia actually showcases the woman, independent in her morality, as a powerful change agent (and this is particularly true when Mercia refuses to marry Marcus if this means denying her faith).⁸⁸ Esther by contrast quietly retreats into her father's keeping ('[*with low obeisance and bowed head, she suddenly turns, casts herself down beside her father, and...buries her face in his bosom*']') (Young, 259) and is thus arguably more socially conservative than Mercia. Once Ben-Hur determines that he is in love with Esther instead of Iras once and for all in Act VI, Esther assents to a love relationship with him,

⁸⁵ Mayer (1994) 15.

⁸⁶ Barrow (2010) 216.

⁸⁷ Barrett (186), from the script reproduced in Mayer (1994).

⁸⁸ Mayer (1994) 108-9. For further commentary on the portrayal of women in *Sign of the Cross*, see Richards (2009: 125-6).

while her father by all accounts within the play remains in slavery. However inconsistent Esther's choices may thus be, her defining characteristic is her exhibition of chaste obedience to father, and then to prospective husband.

Multi-sensory stimuli accompany the transition from Scene 1, the site of Esther's display of humility and conformity to prescribed Victorian social roles for the woman as moral guardian of the household,⁸⁹ to Scene 2, the realm of Iras' dominance. Iras leaves the tent shortly after the revelation of Esther's and Simonides' slavery, in a surreptitious way only perceptible to Ben-Hur and audience members who take notice. Ilderim invites the others into the banquet room (offstage), and Ben-Hur lingers and speaks to himself, allowing the audience access to his warring affections for Iras and Esther. He hears through the curtain Iras singing 'The Lament', a musical number featuring Wallace's lyrics (from the novel) arranged by Kelley into a 'rising melodic line'⁹⁰ that reflects the sense of Ben-Hur's building intrigue, which culminates in his remark as she '[*executes a brilliant passage*]': 'Splendour—and power—and passion!' When Iras sends her servant to deliver a material token of her seduction—the discarded scarlet ribbon—Ben-Hur is all the more encouraged to join her outside. He yields to Iras' promise of returned affection, and the alluring mystique of her singing, and acknowledges that he will not attend Balthasar's sermon in the banquet room: 'Balthasar telleth his tale again; and I should be there to hear...But oh, thou rarer voice!' (260) While earlier in the scene Ben-Hur indicates that he is receptive to Balthasar's story of the Nativity and his theories as to the fulfilment of the prophecy sung in the Prelude (*to Balthasar* 'thy words of last night abide with me, and gladly would I hear more') (255), it is through his present aversion to the story of Balthasar that the audience becomes further distanced from Christ than before.

The scene changes to the Orchard of Palms, on the lake where Ben-Hur expresses his love for Iras. The empty evening landscape, and the physical closeness between the characters downstage creates an aura of intimacy, but this is undermined through Iras' body language, lines of dialogue, and highly intricate, ornamental costume,⁹¹ all of which carry a certain mysterious opacity that disguises her genuine feelings and motives. The lyrics of 'The Lament', although used here as an instrument

⁸⁹ See Dolan (2002: 88, 124) for discussion of sociocultural models.

⁹⁰ Solomon (2012) 176.

⁹¹ Iras has three major costume changes in the play. Each outfit is described in reviews as impeccably made, and carrying a feature that simultaneously covers, yet precisely outlines the body. Detailed descriptions of the three costumes Iras wears in 1920, presumably designed and 'religiously reproduced' after 'plates by Devon, in the British Museum, London', appear in a 16 April 1920 article entitled 'Actress Wears Costly Dress of Ancient Egypt' (*Buffalo Enquirer*. *Ben-Hur* Scrapbook, NYPL).

of seduction, express nostalgia, bittersweet reminiscence, and ‘passion of grief and pain’ (Kelley, 64-5), which colour her memory of leaving her home in Egypt. In Wallace’s novel the words are sung with ‘the expression of passionate grief’ (Wallace, 264).

‘The Lament’ had been set to music several times and circulated in different versions before the emergence of the Klaw and Erlanger production. Most notable perhaps is the 1887 composition by G.W. Chadwick; according to Jon Solomon, who categorises it under ‘parlor music and art songs’, this composition was performed publicly in concert halls and was published in a collection of vocal numbers by various composers.⁹² The Kelley version is arranged so that, according to Katherine Preston, it derives from the Western musical tradition but carries a ‘foreign’ twist: ‘the song has a melody that is not so much...“Middle Eastern”...as excessively chromatic, with oddly shifting harmonies...it is Western in idiom, but at the same time somewhat odd...sounding’.⁹³ These qualities, and the slow tempo, can also be read for their capacity to communicate a melancholy atmosphere. This solo piece may have roused significant associations in the audience, whose members may have been familiar with, or participated in, performances of this song in other contexts. Although the lyrics and the melody have the potential to grant the audience a glimpse into Iras’ psychological experience, the performance of this song offstage denies the spectator the opportunity to see the actress’ gestural and facial expressions, which may have otherwise enhanced Iras’ human vulnerability and rendered her more sympathetic. Instead, the ‘Lament’ is disembodied, nebulous, and complex, and offers Ben-Hur the forbidden excitement of denying the sermon and following misdirected motives for affection.

Act V was for viewers of this production arguably the most highly anticipated, due to the featured appearance of the chariot race in Scene 2, where the association between spectacle and emotional immediacy comes to the fore. Scene 1, set at the entrance to the circus, provides the atmospheric tone of anticipation. The music features reeds and strings punctuated by moments of fanfare with trombones and trumpets (Kelley, 66-7), as supernumeraries mill around onstage, or cross the stage, shouting their support for Ben-Hur or Messala as they enter the arena through a large arched gateway. The angling of the set pieces, and the side of the stadium drawn on the backdrop, create a sense of depth and, with the height of the buildings, grandeur (Fig. 3.5).

⁹² Solomon (2012) 155-7.

⁹³ Preston (1994) 25.

Young plays on the theme of spectacle in this act, and relates it back to the juxtaposed models of femininity in Act IV. Iras and Esther arrive at the scene, Iras ‘[gorgeously attired—face and neck bare]’, and Esther ‘[modestly garbed and veiled]’ (268). The women stand downstage, distinct in position, and in gender, from the rest of the crowd. The surrounding men gaze at Iras (in Fig. 3.5 most of them point at her, intensifying the extent of her power over the multitude). Messala and Drusus huddle together behind the column to the left of the image, Messala awaiting the opportunity to encounter Iras. Young’s insistence on the use of costume and body language as primary physical representations of the moral polarisation of the two women is quite effective in this scenario. This also invokes contemporary debates concerning the extent to which women could or should participate equally with men in the public social sphere, and in the consumption of popular entertainment. Esther cannot abide by public exposure, just as Iras could not stand to remain in the domestic realm in Act IV. Yet the implicit consequence for the behaviour Iras promotes onstage as a model for women in the turn-of-the-century American audience is the lingering patriarchal attitude of suspicion toward the socially independent woman as strange, foreign, an outsider.⁹⁴



Fig. 3.5: Esther and Iras outside the arena (*Ben-Hur* Souvenir Album, 1900)

Iras is simultaneously an object of fascination for male audiences and a herald of social and economic liberation for women, who are invited to participate in Iras’ individuation

⁹⁴ The socially independent, career-minded woman was increasingly becoming a character type in theatre productions with contemporary settings (Mayer, 2009: 15), a model which persisted and was translated into cinema in the early twentieth century.

of female identity from male expectations. Ben-Hur enters the scene and chastises her for her visibility (‘...it is not modest to go so uncovered. Because I would not see thy beauty the target for ten thousand bestial eyes...I would have thee esteem thyself...that thy beauty might be all but forgotten, through reverence for thy purity...’). Iras removes Ben-Hur’s colours from her costume and responds, ‘Why, good Ben-Hur, thou art beside thyself. Mistake me not for the other. I am not thy slave’ (270-1). Young’s insertion of this scenario into Wallace’s story invokes the social function of melodrama,⁹⁵ particularly in its tendency to associate the body (in this case the woman’s voluntary exposure of her body) with degrees of oppression or liberation.⁹⁶ Iras’ exhibition of anger and indignation at Ben-Hur’s presumption invites the audience to observe the balance between the antiquated and the modern, and to evaluate Iras’ attitude of contemporary social progressivism overlain onto the historical setting on stage. The audience also encounters the moral coding of Iras’ anger, which is reprised when she is dismissed by Ben-Hur in Act VI as a result of her association with Messala. She is the only female character in the play who is explicitly directed by the script to exhibit anger. Iras’ patterns of emotional expression are unsuited to her gender within the scope of this play, and in this instance constitute her appearance as a spectacle unto herself, and intensify her urgency to signal her individuation from the submissive identity imposed upon her.

The staging for Scene 2, the actual chariot race, is not mentioned in the script, which offers only one line of dialogue, with Ben-Hur urging on his horses by name. Nor are there any photographs in the souvenir album that indicate what it would have looked like, although secondary scholarship has accumulated descriptions from contemporary publications to reconstruct the onstage appearance. Two teams of horses pulling Ben-Hur and Messala in their chariots ran in place on treadmills, while a rotating panorama backdrop depicting the inside of the Circus of Antioch, with illustrated spectators

⁹⁵ Nikolopoulou (1996: 123) observes this in the reinforcement of ‘the social and material aspects of the story...using [the text] as a medium to address social issues that were relevant to the audiences’ in the case of melodramatisations of Walter Scott’s historical romances.

⁹⁶ Brooks (1994) explores these dynamics. During this period the ‘New Drama’ movement, associated at the time with realism and naturalistic expression (while melodrama was perceived as fantastical and quasi-mythic) and championed by dramatists such as Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw, was also taking on the issue of feminine identity with special attention to the individual psychological and emotional experience of the woman. Strong female leads played by internationally famous actresses such as Sarah Bernhardt and Eleonora Duse, renowned for their powers of complexity in the expression of emotions, thoroughly explored the subjective experiences of the ‘fallen’ or ‘treacherous’ woman, the female pariah (Stokes, 2007: 209-12). When Iras experiences her ‘fall’ in Act VI, rebuffed by Ben-Hur when she entreats him to forgive Messala and restore his fortune, she exhibits a similar degree of passionate anger, accompanied by appropriate music in the score (Kelley, 68-9). Young is not missing an opportunity to ‘go deeper’ with Iras’ psychology. In melodrama, emotional expression is forthright, unequivocal, and morally coded.

looking on from the stands, created the impression of the chariots' rapid motion around the arena.⁹⁷ The aesthetic details enhancing the realism of the race included uneven wheels on the chariot, to simulate the effect of the rough ground within the Circus, a moving belt which threw rocks and dust into the air, and fans inside the chariots to blow back the clothing of Ben-Hur and Messala.⁹⁸ The wheel of Messala's chariot was designed to fall off at one point in the race (with appropriate sound effects enhancing the severity of the accident), while Ben-Hur's team of horses pulled ahead to victory.

The overall effect was to bring to life the painting of Alexander von Wagner, *The Chariot Race* (1893), which was featured on a promotional poster for the Klaw and Erlanger production, and which had previously been a popular item for consumption as an engraving for American homes and schools.⁹⁹ The score does not indicate music accompanying the chariot race. Jon Solomon surveys a number of musical compositions, most notably John Phillip Sousa's 'symphonic poem' 'The Chariot Race' (1891) and E.T. Paull's march 'The Chariot Race or Ben-Hur March' (1894), which preceded the debut of the Klaw and Erlanger production, and attempted to render musically the progression of the race according to Wallace's description in his novel.¹⁰⁰ Sousa's composition was intended for orchestral performance, while Paull's, written for piano, would have been appropriate parlour music. Paull received praise from Wallace for his composition, and went on to produce versions of it for various instrumental ensembles, an observation which leads Jon Solomon to deduce that many Americans may have owned a copy of this particular composition in advance of viewing the Klaw and Erlanger stageplay.¹⁰¹ American readers' sustained interest in an experience of thrill and suspense through a performed adaptation of Wallace's chariot race indicates the high levels of excitement and anxiety with which the audience anticipated this scene. John C. Wingate, writing for *The Chariot*, alludes to the feelings of the 'hard core' *Ben-Hur* devotees, the Sons of Hur, in his description of Act V: 'In the fifth act we have the chariot race for which we have longed. Nothing has caused more anxiety or fear of failure than this race'.

Wingate describes the race in detail, and draws attention to the facial expressions of the actors during the scene ('Messala's face is radiant with smiles and flush with the thought of victory...Ben-Hur, though not exultant, wears a look of confidence and now for the first time a flush comes into his face. The supreme moment

⁹⁷ Miller (2008) 162.

⁹⁸ Morsberger and Morsberger (1980) 459.

⁹⁹ Mayer (1994: 194-5); Malamud (2009: 172).

¹⁰⁰ Solomon (2012) 163-8.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 169.

is at hand...His time has come and leaning forward he catches up the lines of the trusted horses and begins talking to them').¹⁰² For Wingate, the responses from the audience offer an essential contribution to the emotional atmosphere: 'The audience sits in rapturous, breathless silence seeing that this is not a galloping, loping affair as they feared it would be, but a race of splendid thoroughbred horses'; 'The race was over, and the curtain went down on the greatest din ever heard in a New York Theater. The audience which had been held by a spell of complete wonderment could contain itself no longer and the people cheered, laughed and cried with enthusiastic delight'.¹⁰³ This description of the audience as a collective participant, a necessary group of characters in the scene, illustrates the capacity for the emotional immediacy of spectacle. The animated pictorialism, the 'liveness' of the horses, and the lack of dialogue punctuating the physicality of the scene all carry an immersive quality, encouraging its spectators to perceive themselves as part of the production.

From a purely narratological point of view, victory over Messala in Act VI functions to provide the resolution to the melodramatic plotline with three consequences—the punishment of Iras, the romantic union between Ben-Hur and Esther, and the reunion of Ben-Hur with his family. From this perspective Christ's entrance into Jerusalem and healing of Ben-Hur's mother and sister from leprosy can be perceived as the crucial influence through which the latter part of the resolution is reached. Unlike in Wallace's novel, Ben-Hur's conversion does not occur at the site of the Crucifixion, let alone anywhere else. Instead, there is a psychological boundary between Christ and Ben-Hur (and the audience), which remains unresolved at the end of the play. However, from reports of audience engagement, it seems that for most viewers this did not compromise the feelings of spiritual connection they cultivated in response to the Christian content.

In Scene 1 Ben-Hur meets Simonides and Esther at the apartment in the palace of Hur, and reports his meeting with Christ at Bethpage. From Ben-Hur's report, Christ's face retains the feminised qualities, and simultaneous expression of sorrow, compassion, and prophetic wisdom described in Wallace's novel. The inclusion of this vivid meditation on Christ's facial features, which functioned as a popular devotional exercise among evangelical Protestants during this period,¹⁰⁴ introduces an appeal for the audience's reverential engagement. The emotional efficacy of this message, however, is somewhat diluted by Ben-Hur's delivery of it, for he clearly does not

¹⁰² Wingate (1899) reproduced in Morsberger and Morsberger (1980: 462).

¹⁰³ Ibid, 463.

¹⁰⁴ See Chapter 1 Section 2; see also Morgan (1999b: 283, 303).

understand the totality of Christ's role on earth. He intuits that Christ is destined to die, but he also recognises that Christ will not function as an agent of social and political change, and laments the absence of the King who is supposed to fulfil 'our dream of an earthly kingdom' (278). He then expresses bewilderment at Christ's supernatural powers of healing and resurrection, 'by his mere word of command' (279). This is the extent of the theological meditation on Christ's purpose, and the healing influence emerges as the primary focus of Christ's agency for the remainder of the play.

In Scene 2, Palm Sunday, the atmosphere leading up to the appearance of Christ's divine light begins with choral music. Ben-Hur has fallen asleep in the Vale of Hinnom in the search for his family, and there transpires the poignant scene from the novel, where his mother and sister find him and cannot risk staying and awakening him ('*[with anguished movement] ... 'sobbing uncontrollably...in anguish and terror]*' read the directions for the lines of dialogue for the women) (Young, 287). At this point, a four-part choir, positioned behind the backdrop, begins to sing a soft refrain, 'Hosanna in the highest! / Hosanna to the King! / Hosanna to him that cometh in the name of the Lord'. The final phrase resonates with the chant of the multitude Tirzah and her mother encounter in Wallace's novel, 'Blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord' (Wallace, 466). The scene transitions to a new setting, the Mount of Olives, where the atmosphere of jubilation, heralded by the music, comes to replace the desolation of the valley of lepers from the previous scene. Singing multitudes crowd onto the stage, waving palm fronds. The script provides directions for the entrance of Christ's healing light: '*[Amrah and the two lepers, facing the second multitude, kneel, C. Suddenly, from above, a dazzling radiance pours upon the kneeling women; the palms wave, the anthem swells and touches its culmination, the drop becomes opaque, but the chanting continues, again distant and low]*' (Young, 288). During this pantomime, the choir begins to sing a new refrain, 'This is Jesus of Nazareth, this is the prophet of Nazareth and Galilee!' Just before the light appears, the words of the choir are 'Lo! Behold! Thy King, thy King cometh! Travelling in the greatness of his strength!', enhancing the effect of Christ's spiritual immediacy (Kelley, 83-6).

Here as in the Prelude, the audience encounters the light through a drop, which introduces a physical boundary between the audience and the representation of Christ's divinity. It becomes clear that the appearance of Christ is viewed through the

dreamscape of Ben-Hur, sleeping downstage in front of the drop.¹⁰⁵ The boundary between the spectator and Christ's radiance is thus also a point of access to Ben-Hur's psychic vision. Although the audience encounters the healing second-hand, the emotional uplift of the vision is not compromised, but enhanced by the prominence of the light, upstage and on high, over Mount Olivet, and the crescendo of reverential song accompanying it. The employment of the dream, and the translucent drop, renders the vision sacred to a greater degree, for, whether or not Young intended to create this allusion, this scenario invokes Old Testament passages relating to dreams featuring epiphany or prophecy.¹⁰⁶

At this point, Ben-Hur awakens, finds Esther and Malluch, and recounts his dream of his family's healing. One line of Ben-Hur's dialogue is of particular interest here, with reference to the synaesthesia of Christ's word: 'He spake, and their affliction fell from them' (Young, 289). The word of Christ, although retained in Wallace's version of the healing ('Woman, great is thy faith. Be it unto thee as thou wilt') (Wallace, 467), is translated into illumination, an influence whose expression transcends corporeality, but is still perceptible to the viewer through audiovisual modes.

Ben-Hur's earlier state of theological puzzlement gains a greater degree of clarity at the end of the play, when after the healing he is willing to refer to Christ as 'the new light of the world' and to accept the healing of his family as an act of God. However, there is no definitive, significant emotional shift in Ben-Hur as a result of accepting Christ as his personal deliverer as there is in Wallace's novel, a change which lessens the 'original sentimental power [of the play]...drained of its spiritual and psychological force...'.¹⁰⁷ Ben-Hur's recognition of Christ's vital function as not only a physical, but also a spiritual healer, and a *personal* saviour, who guarantees a blessed afterlife (an essential consideration for Ben-Hur in the course of his conversion) is not spelled out in Young as it is in Wallace. This meditation would not have been unprecedented in toga drama, for in Wilson Barrett's *Sign of the Cross* (1895), Marcus remains in the arena with Mercia, and undergoes his conversion, expressing his conviction that he and Mercia will meet their heavenly reward following their martyrdom: 'There is no death for us, for Chrystos hath triumphed over death. The light hath come. Come, my bride. Come—to the light beyond' (Barrett, 187).

¹⁰⁵ Unfortunately the 1900 souvenir album does not provide a photograph of this scene, as it is arguably the most difficult to visualise in terms of the staging, but in Fig. 3.6 (the finale and reunion of Ben-Hur with his family on Mount Olivet) the background used for this scene is visible.

¹⁰⁶ For Old Testament dream sequences, see Flannery-Dailey (2004).

¹⁰⁷ Pentz-Harris, Seger, and Palmer (2007) 121.

The clear moment of Ben-Hur's conversion frequently cited as a significant influence in the decision of many receivers of Wallace's story to convert to Christianity (addressed in Chapter 2) is absent in Young's script. Young's version ends in Scene 3, with the reunited Hur family and Esther kneeling in reverence on Mount Olivet, with chorus members filling the background, waving palms and singing as the music swells to a final crescendo to accompany the end *tableau* (Fig. 3.6).



Fig. 3.6: The finale at Mount Olivet (*Ben-Hur* Souvenir Album, 1900)

In the novel, Ben-Hur's conversion occurs as a result of a telepathic dialogue between Ben-Hur and Christ at the moment of the Crucifixion, and the Passion narrative is thus heavily implicated. In the United States at the turn of the century, Passion Plays were being circulated in early cinema and slideshows, and film as a medium was perceived by the church community as an appropriate means of animating the Bible for evangelist and devotional functions, but also for 'spiritualizing the body' of Christ.¹⁰⁸ By contrast, the 'liveness' of the theatre would have rendered it highly offensive to audiences to represent Christ physically onstage,¹⁰⁹ notwithstanding the Catholic associations with the Passion narrative, which in fact Wallace wanted to avoid along with other possible denominational signifiers.

Without the conversion and the epilogue from Wallace, the play invites its audiences to derive a new message from the religious content. The pictorialism and

¹⁰⁸ Fox (2005) 309.

¹⁰⁹ Miller (forthcoming, 3) mentions the violent reaction expressed by American viewers in response to dramatist Salmi Morse's staging of a Passion Play (including a Crucifixion scene) in San Francisco in 1879.

musical enhancement of the final *tableau* provide a visual and aural experience of jubilation and moral uplift resulting from the final melodramatic resolution and the miraculous agency of Christ's Word/light. The finale is composed in order to encourage the spectator, whether he or she has primary interest in the secular or religious aspects (or a combination of both) of the performance, to testify to feelings of emotional uplift created by the synthesis of melodrama's expressive modes. And for the Son/Daughter of Hur or other spectator who has a special emotional investment in the experience of Wallace's novel, the collectivity and affective communion of the final scene—the voices and palm fronds raised in unison—serves to invoke, and to reinforce feelings of affiliation with the emotional community of reception associated with *Ben-Hur*/Wallace to which he or she belongs. For newcomers to *Ben-Hur*, this may signal an initiation into that feeling of longing to join a community of other receivers of the story.

3.4. PROMOTIONAL SOLICITATIONS, AND AUDIENCE RESPONSES TO KLAW AND ERLANGER'S *BEN-HUR* (1899-1920)

This section both explores the ways in which promotional strategies solicited audiences' emotional engagement with the Klaw and Erlanger *Ben-Hur*, and traces patterns of actual audience responses to the play during its twenty-one-year run. Special attention will be devoted to the three major areas of focus established in Chapter 2—emotional response to religious content, secular content, and the relationship of the play to the novel and to Wallace's authorial persona—in order for this analysis to be read in conversation with the analysis of responses to the novel.

The primary sources featured in this survey fall within the following types of documentation:

- Unpublished correspondence to Lew and Susan Wallace from viewers. There are only very few extant examples of this.¹¹⁰
- Published accounts of promotion and reception: newspaper and periodical reviews documenting local performances of the stageplay; advertisements and promotional material from Klaw and Erlanger published in newspapers

¹¹⁰ Morsberger and Morsberger (1980: 465) claim that after the stageplay's debut, 'letters poured in from admirers' to Lew Wallace. However, they only cite one letter from a clergyman, John Handley of the Church of St. Paul the Apostle. The praise in this letter (dated 13 January 1900; Wallace mss. II. 1900, LL) is expressed indirectly, for it is addressed to a Mr. Conway, who is instructed to pass on the writer's compliments to Wallace.

nationwide. As in Miller's article (forthcoming), the analysis here will employ primarily this category of documentation in order to reconstruct audience responses to the play.¹¹¹

- Consumer products associated with the stageplay's reception. These include the souvenir album from which the images in Section 3 were taken; abridged and unabridged editions of Wallace's novel published during the circulation of the Klaw and Erlanger production; special editions of the Kelley score; and one instance of a creative product generated by a spectator—"Ben-Hur": A Poem Written on the Play' by Hon. Nat Ward Fitzgerald.

The discussion of reader responses in Chapter 2 yielded a number of sources referencing distinct communities of reception in the United States that emerged, evolved, and interacted with one another in response to Wallace's novel. Many of these sources indicated a collective response, or a response from an individual who explicitly identifies himself/herself as a member of a community, characterised by an emotional experience of reading. In the case of audience responses to the Klaw and Erlanger stageplay, different issues of collectivity are introduced through the medium of melodrama, and thus necessitate redefined expectations for the emergence of 'emotional communities' of response. Most sources documenting audience responses to the play come through published accounts. These testimonies are often generated by publicists or professional reviewers, who focus on the immediate reactions (anticipated/solicited in the case of promotion, or observed in the case of reviews) of the audience to the action onstage. Only a few reviewers use 'we' to implicate themselves within the group of responding spectators, and there are not many instances of the individual reviewer identifying himself or herself as part of a group of receivers manifesting emotional responses to the content of the stageplay, in contrast to many of the reader responses from Chapter 2. Explicit evidence of audiences' sustained collective emotional engagement with the play is also not apparent in most reviews, whereas readers' letters to Wallace gave the impression of this phenomenon occurring in response to the novel. Although objects associated with consumption signal a sustained engagement with the play (the 1900 *Ben-Hur* Souvenir Album or the 1903 *Ben-Hur: The Player's Edition*,

¹¹¹ The majority of sources within this category were accessed in the most comprehensive collection of published advertisements and reviews of *Ben-Hur* throughout the entirety of its run, a scrapbook on microfilm (call number *ZAN-*T33, reels 3 and 4) housed in the Billy Rose Theatre Division, NYPL.

for instance), there is insufficient information to suggest the emergence of specific *communities* of reception around these objects.

Thus, due to the sources available, it is difficult to trace the emergence of ‘emotional communities’ identified on the basis of their members’ willingness to re-experience certain relationships to the play (stimulated by either Christian or secular dramatic content). However, this is not to say that it is impossible to explore notions of communal emotional experience in the documentation of responses to *Ben-Hur*. On the contrary, both advertisements and reviews tend towards either anticipation or observation of collective audience response in the theatre. These documents also discuss *Ben-Hur*’s pre-existing communities of spectatorship, defined by their members’ shared attitudes toward Wallace’s novel, the relationship between Christianity and the theatre, the inclusion of spectacle in religious dramas,¹¹² or other related social and aesthetic concerns; sometimes these pre-existing communities were church congregations.¹¹³ The social or moral values of these communities of spectatorship are also discussed, in terms of the play’s ability to reinforce them or to subvert them.

The vast number of sources published in newspapers and periodicals provides significant insight into the ways in which the play *Ben-Hur* was advertised and received in regional communities across the United States throughout its twenty-one-year period of circulation. From these sources it is also possible to construct a timeline of major events that drew significant press coverage (as is clear from the number of publications covering these events) throughout this period:

29 November 1899 *Ben-Hur* debuts at Broadway Theatre, New York City.¹¹⁴

April 1902 *Ben-Hur* travels to London’s Drury Lane Theatre (the 1500th performance is staged during this run).¹¹⁵

15 February 1905 Lew Wallace dies

¹¹² Miller (forthcoming: 3-4) for discussion of the ‘religious drama’ as an emerging genre in mainstream American theatre at the beginning of the twentieth century.

¹¹³ Morsberger and Morsberger (1980) 465.

¹¹⁴ *Ben-Hur* played 194 times at Broadway in its first season, which ended May 1900. It would continue to return to Broadway regularly over the next twenty years (Morsberger and Morsberger, 1980: 464).

¹¹⁵ Untitled article (31 March 1907). *New York Press*, *Ben-Hur* Scrapbook, NYPL.

1906	Lew Wallace's <i>Autobiography</i> is published posthumously by Harper and Brothers.
2 April 1907	The 2500 th performance of Klaw and Erlanger <i>Ben-Hur</i> is staged at the New York Academy of Music.
December 1907	Kalem Studios releases 1000-foot film of <i>Ben-Hur</i> . ¹¹⁶
May 1908	Kalem Studios is sued by Harper and Brothers, Klaw and Erlanger, and Henry Wallace, setting a new precedent for copyright law in the production of motion picture adaptations of novels or plays.
April 1912	<i>Ben-Hur</i> returns to London, playing at Theatre Royal, Drury Lane.
October 1918	Newspapers promote twentieth anniversary performances of the Klaw and Erlanger <i>Ben-Hur</i> in New York.
April 1920	Final performance of Klaw and Erlanger <i>Ben-Hur</i> in New York.

The following analysis will demonstrate the ways in which audience responses to the religious and secular elements of the play were both solicited and reported throughout this twenty-one-year period. Discourse regarding the association between the play and the novel, and the impact of the play on Wallace's authorial persona, will also be discussed.

Three major concerns tend to dominate the discourse surrounding the portrayals of Judaism, Christianity, and Christ in the play. Firstly, the play was said to challenge contemporary American Protestant attitudes toward the theatre as a place of sin, and to provoke questions of whether representation of Christ at the theatre was sacrilegious. Secondly, the play's function as an instrument of Christian devotion and missionary impetus was highlighted. Thirdly, the play's provision of a Christian origin narrative that encourages interfaith empathy and cooperation was advertised to non-Christian (most prominently Jewish) audiences.

¹¹⁶ See Section 5 of this chapter for the Kalem film.

Sin and sacrilege

Despite the overwhelming success of Wilson Barrett's *Sign of the Cross* (1895), American Protestant communities maintained suspicion of the theatre as a place of moral turpitude, and were cautious about the prospect of attending the theatre, let alone seeing a religious play. The American Tract Society's long-standing, vehement discouragement of theatre as a harmful behaviour that could awaken emotions dangerous to Christian sympathy, and/or isolate the Christian theatre spectator from his or her familial or religious community was similar to the attitude toward novels.¹¹⁷

The potential issue of whether the vivid portrayals of the Christmas star in the Prelude and the healing light of Christ in Act VI were sacrilegious was usually raised among the first reviews of the stageplay in a given community, demonstrated in the reviews of the Broadway debut. The *New York Clipper* assured prospective audiences that 'There is...not a line nor a scene which should hurt the sensibilities or offend the judgement of the truly devout'.¹¹⁸ Likewise, reviewer and Son of Hur, John C. Wingate, was careful to include in his review for *The Chariot* a line honouring the potential scruples of Christian members of The Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur: 'There is nothing on the stage to shock or disturb the most sensitive delicacy of any Christian gentleman or lady...'.¹¹⁹

On the other hand, some American reviews criticised the visual representation of Christ's divinity. The *New York Tribune*, while conceding that 'the popular success of the spectacle could not be denied', found that the artifice of the theatre constituted an inappropriate representation of 'The atmosphere of that...sublime night, when...the awful portent of revealed Divinity flamed in the wintry sky...A glorified circular buzz-saw, in a mist of paint and gauze, is not adequate representation of the Star of Bethlehem.'¹²⁰ Some leaders of Christian communities in the United States reportedly discouraged their congregations from seeing the play, on the grounds that it 'border[ed]

¹¹⁷ Morgan (1999a) 84. Miller (forthcoming, 2-3) cites a tract published by the American Tract Society in 1820, which calls the theatre 'a school of vice and debauchery'.

¹¹⁸ 'Review and Comment: Broadway Theatre'. (1 December 1899). *New York Clipper*, 855, USC.

¹¹⁹ Wingate (1899), reproduced in Morsberger and Morsberger (1980: 464).

¹²⁰ 'A Spectacle at the Broadway: "Ben-Hur"'. (30 November 1899). *New York Tribune*, Library of Congress digital collections:

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030214/1899-11-30/ed-1/seq-7/> (Accessed 6 December 2015).

on sacrilege' for *Ben-Hur*'s exhibitors to represent 'so sacred a thing as the birth...of Christ' onstage for profit.¹²¹

Klaw and Erlanger anticipated Christian communities' concerns about potential sacrilege, and developed a marketing campaign, circulated throughout the United States prior to the local arrival of *Ben-Hur*, in order to encourage local Christian populations to see the play.¹²² This marketing strategy is apparent in a 1906 advertisement in the *Elmira Gazette* of Elmira, New York, which relates the story of one clergy member's changed attitude to the theatre as a result of seeing *Ben-Hur*. An unnamed 'prominent Baptist preacher' in Chicago is reported to have been invited to attend *Ben-Hur* by the business manager of the touring *Ben-Hur* production and director of the marketing campaign, who had 'just been introduced to the divine'. This preacher, having seen the play, is quoted as having written to the theatre manager a glowing impression of the play's capacity to speak to 'the deep-grained, firm-rooted religious feeling in the human heart...'.¹²³

The advertisement's use of a religious authority to dispel anxieties about the theatre among Protestant communities is accompanied by a subtle nod to the status of Klaw and Erlanger's business manager as a recent convert. Klaw and Erlanger made similar claims during the promotion for the play in the first decade of its circulation that dramatist William Young was divinely inspired when adapting Wallace's novel for the stage.¹²⁴ This emulation of Wallace's example of publicising his own alleged conversion experience in the process of composing the novel¹²⁵ urged readers of *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880) to apply their reverential enthusiasm to the stageplay.

Christian devotion

Many reviews and advertisements cited the 'reverence' of the production, according to the apparently observable impact of the religious material on audiences.¹²⁶ The play received glowing admiration from a Catholic priest from the church of St. Paul the Apostle in New York, who reported in a letter that he had '...felt the audience becoming a worshipful congregation under the influence of Christ's story... I adverted

¹²¹ 'Pastor Objects to Ben Hur' (29 January 1906). *Des Moines News*. *Ben-Hur* Scrapbook, NYPL. British articles in the *Ben-Hur* scrapbook (NYPL) reveal that the charge of sacrilege was an even greater issue for critics in London, perhaps due to English censorship laws preventing an actor from representing Christ onstage. Foulkes (1997: 118) describes these terms as they were applied to Laurence Housman's *Bethlehem* (1902) in the same year *Ben-Hur* was performed in London.

¹²² Miller (forthcoming) 4.

¹²³ 'Ben-Hur' (19 March 1906). *Elmira Gazette*, *Ben-Hur* Scrapbook, NYPL.

¹²⁴ Miller (forthcoming) 6.

¹²⁵ See discussion of Wallace's lecture, 'How I Came to Write *Ben-Hur*', in Chapter 2.

¹²⁶ Miller (forthcoming: 20-22) offers a survey of materials speaking to this theme.

for the first time to the immense missionary work *Ben-Hur* has done....I have frequently.... recommended my penitents to go to the play'.¹²⁷ A writer for *Goodwin's Weekly* in Salt Lake City called the Mount of Olivet scene 'one of the most stirring scenes ever put upon the stage', wherein 'His tremendous dominating power is felt with thrilling effect'. The advertisement describes the theatre as if it were a pilgrimage site, the railroads offering discounted rates to bring together rural and urban Americans for the purpose of worship.¹²⁸

Language emphasising the play's capacity to draw together collective bodies of Christian worshippers, and to create congregations, came to be employed in promotional material. The *Advertiser* in Elmira, New York included a promotion that read, 'Ben Hur is a sermon. The drama must lead to Bible study and with the spirit that is most helpful'.¹²⁹ Howard Miller's forthcoming article discusses the instrumental role of *Ben-Hur* in the transformation of church attitudes toward the theatre. He describes the structure of *Ben-Hur* onstage (with hymns at the opening and closing) as reminiscent of a church service programme with which many evangelical Protestant denominations in the early twentieth century would have been familiar.¹³⁰ It is worth considering ideas of play as sermon and audience as congregation within the scope of changing conceptions of the church and the theatre as distinct physical spaces in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. Auditorium-style churches were being constructed to allow for larger congregations made up of members from cities combined with those from surrounding towns. Some evangelical Protestant services were even held in opera houses. Amidst this construction, or use, of theatre-type spaces for church services, grew a movement to 'let churches be made as comfortable as theaters', as an incentive for potential converts to attend.¹³¹

The music associated with the religious episodes in the play, whether dominant and choral, or incidental and unobtrusive,¹³² was a means through which audiences seemed to manifest a more immediate emotional experience of reverence, religious

¹²⁷ Letter to Mr. Conway from John Haudley of the Church of St. Paul the Apostle (13 January 1900), LL. This letter is also reproduced in Wallace (1906: 955-6.).

¹²⁸ "'Ben-Hur" to be a Christmas Offering in Salt Lake' (December 16, 1905). *Goodwin's Weekly: A Thinking Paper for Thinking People*, APD. See Mayer (2009: 37) for discussion of the contemporary importance of the railroad network for travelling theatre companies and customers.

¹²⁹ Untitled article (2 April 1906). *Advertiser. Ben-Hur* Scrapbook, NYPL.

¹³⁰ Miller (forthcoming) 10-15.

¹³¹ Kilde (2005) 130.

¹³² A 1918 article from the *Outlook*, a Protestant newspaper whose circulation was 100,000 in 1900 (Hutchinson, 2003: 143), describes the considerable influence Kelley's 'incidental' music can have on the spectator's affective experience of the Prelude in *Ben-Hur*. The article describes Kelley's 'motif', which creates an emotional atmosphere to support, rather than dominate, the action onstage ('A Star, A Symphony, and Pilgrim's Progress' (13 February 1918). *Outlook*, APD).

devotion, or spiritual contemplation, in response to the Christian material onstage. Evidence also demonstrates that circulation of the music allowed American audiences to maintain their engagement with the religious feeling the play stirred within them, in the comfort and religious sanctuary of their homes. The *Ben-Hur* Souvenir Album sold at theatres has a page with the sheet music for the theme ‘Jesus of Nazareth’, reproduced with a description of the action onstage which the theme accompanies (the congregation of palm-bearers on Mount Olivet, and the healing of the lepers). In 1900 the John Church Company produced the choral music for *The Prophecy* and *The Fulfilment* (‘Hosanna in the Highest’) for voice and piano, for purchase at 12 cents and 40 cents respectively.¹³³

One instance of a spectator’s generation of original artwork inspired by the stageplay suggests the missionary influence Christian audiences attributed to *Ben-Hur*. The Wallace manuscript in the Lilly Library contains “‘Ben-Hur’: A Poem Written on the Play’ by Nat Ward Fitzgerald of Charlestown, West Virginia.”¹³⁴ Although his poem is not dated, it is printed in the form of a pamphlet, indicating that it enjoyed at least local circulation. The poem describes the play’s immersion of the spectator in the sensory experience of the biblical episodes, which are communicated more clearly onstage than in written or oral forms, according to Fitzgerald. The poem describes the process by which Christian faith is re-invigorated, when the spectator projects himself or herself into the characters onstage who bear witness to Christ’s appearance: ‘In scenes so vivid and intense, Their souls respond in deep amen’.

Emotional and spiritual communion with Christ is emphasised in the lines following a reference to the healing of the lepers. For Fitzgerald, this final sequence in the play is instrumental in *Ben-Hur*’s capacity to convert spectators to Christianity. It invites viewers both to experience the healing influence of Christ in the theatre, and to derive from this experience a willingness to demonstrate a *lasting* faith in Christ as a saviour, demonstrated by the characters onstage. ‘In spirit, we our oneness feel / With Jesus Christ, and *sense* His might, / Which doth all sin and sickness heal, / And saves from darkness—leads to light’.¹³⁵

¹³³ Kelley (1900). ‘Choruses from “Ben-Hur”’, SU. According to Pisani (2014: xx), it was not unusual for ‘music with a precise visual or aural reference within the play’ to be published, ‘especially if it had commercial value’.

¹³⁴ Fitzgerald was a local statesman who ran for the Populist Party in the 1896 West Virginia gubernatorial election (Dubin, 2010: 606).

¹³⁵ Fitzgerald (undated). “‘Ben-Hur’: A Poem Written on the Play’. Wallace MSS. n.d., LL.

In *Ben-Hur*'s later years, advertisements dedicated to sensationalist Christian evangelism began to circulate. These advertisements featured testimonies from public figures, such as statesman William Jennings Bryan and professional evangelist Billy Sunday, known charismatic leaders of the social gospel movement and proto-fundamentalists.¹³⁶ This promotion campaign encouraged audiences to witness and sympathetically experience the suffering of proto-Christians under the Romans (represented by Ben-Hur's slavery in the galleys, and his family's imprisonment and leprosy), before their martyrdom and eventual spiritual salvation. A 1916 advertisement for *Ben-Hur* in the *New York Evening Journal* carries a title much more reminiscent of Barrett's *Sign of the Cross* than *Ben-Hur*, 'The Burning Christians That Amused Nero'.¹³⁷ The article is accompanied by a graphic illustration of Christian martyrs being burned at the stake, while a stoic Nero watches uninterestedly.

This promotion strategy is conflated with evangelism produced by a powerful movement in American Protestantism. Perhaps the most bizarre aspect of this advertising campaign is the fact that most New York audiences by the play's seventeenth year would likely have been familiar with the content of the play, not to mention Wallace's novel, and able to discern the high degree of irrelevance of these associations claimed for *Ben-Hur*. Yet, the personalities involved in this campaign, particularly that of Billy Sunday, who was at this time the most famous revivalist in the United States,¹³⁸ would have been a powerful voice of persuasion for evangelical Christians who were still resistant to attending the theatre.¹³⁹

Promotion strategies for Jewish audiences

Howard Miller argues quite persuasively that throughout the twenty-one years of *Ben-Hur* onstage, Klaw and Erlanger specifically directed their advertisements to evangelical Protestants' interest in cultivating an affective relationship with the (non-corporeal, non-suffering) 'Christ spirit'.¹⁴⁰ Although this was the case, there are also

¹³⁶ For Sunday and (proto-)fundamentalism, see Johnson (2008: 79). Hutchinson (2003: 143) explains that while the term 'fundamentalism', used to indicate the literal interpretation of the Bible as the only infallible source of Christian salvation, was not in use until the 1920s, Bryan was a 'strict proponent of early fundamentalism'. Miller (forthcoming, 22-3) discusses a Billy Sunday advertisement for *Ben-Hur*.

¹³⁷ 'The Burning Christians—That Amused Nero' (28 December 1916). *New York Journal. Ben-Hur* Scrapbook, NYPL.

¹³⁸ Dorsett (2002: 93) estimates that by 1935 Sunday had preached to 100 million people; the peak of his career lasted from 1908 to 1920.

¹³⁹ Bruns (1992 (143). Sunday was known to preach on theatre as immoral and inspired by the devil, and the prominent exception he made for *Ben-Hur* would have stood out to his avid followers.

¹⁴⁰ Miller (2008: 154-5.); Miller (forthcoming: 6,9).

instances of advertising campaigns addressed to prospective Jewish audiences, particularly in urban areas.

In one promotional feature, Rabbi Samuel Hirschberg of the Temple Chabel Shaion in Boston is quoted as expressing his ‘exalted mood’ following his viewing of *Ben-Hur* at the Colonial Theatre, due to a combination of observing the emotional responses of Christians in the audience, and viewing a play whose protagonists (the Hur family, Simonides, and Esther) represented a positive portrayal of Jewish religiosity:

Although not a believer in the Messiahship of the Nazarene, I could really feel the spiritualizing influence the play did have upon those of the audience who were believers.... If there is one work...which a Jewish minister sets for himself to accomplish, it is the combatting of the prejudices of...his people...at the hands of the non-Jewish world....["Ben Hur"] teaches men, as dozens of sermons could not, to respect the Jews. Most all lovable and admirable characters in the play are Jews, and they are wholly such characters. It is to be observed, simply by the power of their own faith Judaism and none other.¹⁴¹

Hirschberg’s letter claiming *Ben-Hur*’s resistance to the anti-Semitism promulgated in American urban society was used to promote the stageplay in New York.¹⁴² In New York City, the ‘heart and center of Jewish settlement’ in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,¹⁴³ Klaw and Erlanger sought to kindle the interest of Jewish patrons through a similar strategy to that used to draw evangelical Christian audiences, namely broadcasting praise for the production from Jewish religious leaders. Advertisements for and reviews of *Ben-Hur* were also circulated in Yiddish newspapers, which were gaining ground in New York in the early 1900s;¹⁴⁴ this additional publicity would have been a significant means of reaching prospective Jewish spectators, especially during a time when in the city mainstream drama was competing with Yiddish theatre groups for Jewish audiences.¹⁴⁵

Acting and emotional immediacy

The sources soliciting and documenting audience responses to secular elements of *Ben-Hur* on stage demonstrate what appears to be a heightened frequency of discussions regarding emotional engagement, compared to the incidence of emotional engagement with secular elements cited in responses to the novel. Discourse concerning the

¹⁴¹ ‘Lessons in Play of “Ben Hur” (12 March 1909). *Utica Herald-Dispatch*. *Ben-Hur* Scrapbook, NYPL.

¹⁴² Sorin (1992) 102, 147-8.

¹⁴³ Sachar (1992: 140-1) explains that by 1890 the Jewish population in New York had reached 200,000, and at least 70 percent of East European Jews who immigrated to the United States between 1870 and 1890 settled in New York.

¹⁴⁴ *Ben-Hur* Scrapbook 125, NYPL.

¹⁴⁵ In the early twentieth century Yiddish theatre groups in New York City thrived, adapting works from Shakespeare, Ibsen, and other world-famous playwrights for immigrant population. Dramas would often deal with social issues reflecting the experiences of Jewish immigrants (Sorin, 1992: 99).

potential for audiences to engage with the non-religious elements of the play revolves particularly around claims of emotional immediacy created by acting styles and spectacular, or sensational scenes.

Young's characterisation of Iras' mystery, danger, and sensuality through the use of varied aesthetic modes (particularly costume and music) discussed in Section 3 was frequently addressed in promotions and reviews. Iras receives by far the most publicity out of any single character in Klaw and Erlanger's *Ben-Hur*, sometimes with entire promotional features dedicated to introducing her character to prospective audiences.

In November 1907, an advertisement in the Toledo *Blade* (reproduced in New Orleans newspapers in January 1908) provides commentary on the spectator's relationship with Iras, and even posits the influence of Rome upon modern American contempt for the 'dangerous' Egyptian female: '...the name of Cleopatra has echoed down the centuries...It was to the interest of the Romans to keep odium on the ruler of one of their conquered lands'. The representation of emotions in Iras' tempestuous relationship with Ben-Hur enacted on stage is also described, with a potential hint of sympathy for Iras' character, who is characterised as a slave to destructive emotions, rather than a cunning perpetrator of villainy: 'In "Ben Hur", Iras, the Egyptian, typifies the dark, base side of nature. She loves Ben Hur, but her love is a vicious passion and not the ennobling emotion that makes men and women better. She lends herself, in the frenzy of her passion, to the schemes of Messala, Ben Hur's archenemy'.¹⁴⁶

Iras then becomes simultaneously a model of the dangerous female seen many times over in melodrama,¹⁴⁷ normally in Egyptian guise, and a sympathetic individual, whose feelings and circumstances allow her to fall victim to morally transgressive behaviour. Klaw and Erlanger's publicity advertises Iras' story to be a cautionary tale for female spectators, although it also plays up the elaborate aesthetic representation of Iras, from her lavish costumes to her alluring musical number.¹⁴⁸

The association of stardom with Iras' onstage role begins to emerge in the first decade of the 1900s. Helen Singer, who played the role in 1907-1908, was perhaps the most widely promoted Iras. The Toledo *Blade* advertisement (referenced above)

¹⁴⁶ 'The Egyptian Enchantress' (30 November 1907). *Blade, Ben-Hur* Scrapbook, NYPL.

¹⁴⁷ Mayer (2009) 16.

¹⁴⁸ One article in the Buffalo, New York *Enquirer* describes in detail Iras' costumes from the various acts, and attributes their design to the character's personality: 'the pear-shaped pearls that fringe the crown dangle about the eyes of Iris like tears from her many victims; a diamond snake coils dangerously around her arm; her hands dazzle the beholder with the brilliance of the scintillating gems on her fingers' ('Actress Wears Costly Dress of Ancient Egypt' (16 April 1920), *Enquirer, Ben-Hur* Scrapbook, NYPL).

describes Singer as ‘the living embodiment of the siren Lew Wallace drew, for her beauty is of exactly the type he had in mind when he wrote of the wiles of his Egyptian adventuress’ (Fig. 3.7).¹⁴⁹ This article exalts the role of Iras from an artistic standpoint, placing it alongside roles of Cleopatra and Salammbô in Shakespeare and Flaubert, respectively, in the traditions of literature and theatre. Herbert Beerbohm Tree, a showrunner of London toga plays, would capitalise on the popular association of Iras with Cleopatra by casting Constance Collier, who had won the esteem of theatre critics as Iras in the 1902 Drury Lane production of *Ben-Hur*, as Cleopatra in his 1906 production of *Antony and Cleopatra*.¹⁵⁰



Fig. 3.7: Promotional photographs of Helen Singer as Iras. 30 November 1907. Toledo Blade. Ben-Hur Scrapbook, reel 3 (NYPL).

Sensation and spectacle

The chariot race naturally emerged as the focal point of reviews emphasising the spectacular elements of the stageplay, and their crucial role in facilitating intensity in audiences’ emotional engagement with the production. In 1907, when the production returned to New York, audiences were still being described as responding to the realism of the chariot race, as if they were transported to ‘the very atmosphere of Palestine at the time in which the Saviour lived’:

No such vociferous demonstrations of approval have ever been witnessed in a New York playhouse as are nightly given to that wondrous scene representing the chariot

¹⁴⁹ Singer’s performance met consternation from some reviewers, such as a critic from *The Washington Times*, who found her ‘undisguised sensuality’ in the role lacking the proper mystique: ‘the role requires a languorous, mystical, subtle interpretation of much finesse and artfulness’ (‘“Ben-Hur’s” Appeal’ 17 November 1907. *The Washington Times*, Ben-Hur Scrapbook, NYPL).

¹⁵⁰ Barrow (2010) 213. A review of the London production published in *The Sphere* comments on Collier’s masterful portrayal of Iras which ‘did not cause offense’, in contrast to the biblical episodes (Untitled article (12 April 1902). *The Sphere*, Ben-Hur Scrapbook, NYPL).

race, wherein the optical illusion of tremendous speed on the part of the 20 horses as they seemingly pass thousands upon thousands of eager spectators in the arena of the Circus of Antioch makes the contest a vivid reality...¹⁵¹

The chariot race, and its ability to legitimise *Ben-Hur* as a production of ‘high art’ gained all the more notoriety in the United States after the London performances in 1902, at which the King viewed the chariot race from a special box seat erected in the orchestra pit.¹⁵² Reports of the upcoming 2500th performance of the play at the Academy of Music in New York look back to this phenomenon as a turning point in public perceptions of *Ben-Hur*.¹⁵³ The play was said to bring ‘high class’ to the emerging performance genre of the ‘religious drama’, which was then defined by three major aspects of emotional engagement: ‘spectacular realism, heightened dramatic effect, and religious sentiment’.¹⁵⁴

Some viewers expressed a particular personal engagement with the sensory immediacy of the mise-en-scène. For instance, Son of Hur John Wingate has much to say about the set design of the lake in Act IV: ‘The moon in this scene is just above the water, out of which it has risen and its reflection lies quivering before the audience...When Ben-Hur and Iras stepped into their boat...the people in that great audience, if one may judge by their expressions, felt like taking up their oars and rowing away with them’.¹⁵⁵ Wingate’s descriptions of such secular scenes and the reactions they stimulate in audience members are unique, for discourse surrounding audience response, at least in the published resources available, tends to be centred on the religious material.

Evolution of the text and the Wallace persona

The relationship between the novel and its author’s publicised persona was crucial to the development of communities of readers on the basis of a shared emotional relationship to the content (particularly the Christian episodes) of *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880). The advent of the Klaw and Erlanger stageplay raises questions regarding changes in public perceptions of the relationship between the story of *Ben-Hur* and its original author. Did *Ben-Hur* cease to be known primarily as a novel? How was the relationship between the play’s ‘authors’ (particularly Klaw and Erlanger,

¹⁵¹ “‘Ben Hur’ Continues to Attract Large Audiences to the New York Academy of Music’ (18 March 1907). *Star* (Nyack), *Ben-Hur* Scrapbook, NYPL.

¹⁵² ‘King Sees Ben Hur: Edward VII Has Special Box Built for him in the Theatre’ (15 April 1902). *New York Herald*, *Ben-Hur* Scrapbook, NYPL.

¹⁵³ Untitled Article (21 March 1907). *New York Telegraph*. *Ben-Hur* Scrapbook, NYPL.

¹⁵⁴ “‘Ben Hur’ Has Changed the Attitude of the Churches toward the Theaters’ (22 December 1907). *Chattanooga Star*. *Ben-Hur* Scrapbook, NYPL.

¹⁵⁵ Wingate, reproduced in Morsberger and Morsberger (1980: 462).

William Young, Edgar Stillman Kelley) and Wallace represented? After Wallace's death, did audiences exhibit interest in cultivating a personal relationship with the author(s) of the dramatic text? What effects did the stageplay have on the novel's appearance? These questions can be addressed through an examination of the evolving references to Wallace in promotions and reviews throughout the play's run.

Shortly after the Broadway debut of *Ben-Hur*, the *Indianapolis News* in Wallace's home state of Indiana published the author's impressions of the play:

I was firm in my conviction that the crucifixion or the divine presence...have no place in a drama of today....The religious atmosphere...had to be preserved...in order not to jar the sensibilities of that Christian community which had given its greatest support and encouragement to my book....I am particularly gratified at the tact and sensitiveness displayed in the treatment of the religious episodes... [I] find that at last the characters depicted in "Ben-Hur" have been given life...without profanation.¹⁵⁶

The tone of Wallace's words quoted in this article is reassuring, and reinforced by the author's claim that only after consultation with Christian friends did he consent to the dramatisation. The feelings of the 'Christian community', his most significant following, are acknowledged for their significant influence over the decision to produce a dramatic adaptation. Wallace discusses the play as if it had been co-written by the readers, whose sensibilities were reportedly represented in the scriptwriting process. Wallace once again indulges his readers' interest in cultivating a personal relationship with him and his work, and encourages prospective audiences to perceive the play as an adaptation that creates a vivid image of the beloved characters from the novel, and does not through the nature of its performance medium profane the sacred material belonging exclusively to the text.

Wallace's authorial role is invoked in the majority of advertisements and professional reviews of the play throughout its twenty-one-year run, despite the occurrence of Wallace's death near the beginning of the play's circulation. Wallace is for the most part separated from the charges of sacrilege associated with the play. Instead, playwright William Young or exhibitors Klaw and Erlanger are blamed for these perceived transgressions.¹⁵⁷ Yet while audiences expressed relief or anguish at the adaptation of *Ben-Hur* (1880) for the stage, individuals writing to Wallace for the remainder of his life during the period when the play was circulating continued to express their primary engagement with his novel. Although the stageplay was undoubtedly a very important means for audiences to cultivate a vivid, affective

¹⁵⁶ 'Lew Wallace Pleased' (1 December 1899). *Indianapolis News*, CDPL.

¹⁵⁷ For instance, in an untitled (4 April 1902) London review from *The Morning Leader* (*Ben-Hur* Scrapbook, NYPL).

relationship with the narrative of *Ben-Hur*, the novel and Wallace continued to be perceived as the ultimate sources for this connection.

A promotional feature in the Fort Wayne, Indiana *Gazette* describes a resurgence of interest in the novel as a result of the play's circulation: 'General Lew Wallace's famous tale of the Christ is displayed prominently in every bookshop; it is in the greatest demand at all the libraries and those who have read the book are taking it down from the shelf to reread'.¹⁵⁸ An advertisement for the New York Academy of Music performances in 1907 reflects upon the national significance of the novel: 'in many homes through America Ben-Hur occupies a place beside the family Bible'.¹⁵⁹ J.L. Clarke, a friend of Susan Wallace's, saw the dramatic adaptation, also from Klaw and Erlanger, of Wallace's next major novel following *Ben-Hur* (1880), *The Prince of India* (1893). Clarke advises Susan Wallace not to expect *The Prince of India* onstage to receive the overwhelming audience response *Ben-Hur* had experienced. He claims that the cultural sensation of *Ben-Hur* would not soon be replicated, because of its singular content ('to American civilisation the story of Christ is the most dramatic thing in the world') and the lasting enthusiasm for the novel among readers, who were 'prepared to welcome the splendid story to the stage'.¹⁶⁰

The stage adaptation of the novel resulted in significant evolution in the materiality of the literary text. Before the advent of the stageplay, Harper and Brothers had reprinted the novel in abridged and unabridged versions with accompanying illustrations, such as the Garfield Edition (1891) and *Seekers After the Light* (1887).¹⁶¹ After the emergence of the stageplay, readers were invited to experience a different manner of relationship with Wallace's novel. *Ben-Hur: The Player's Edition*¹⁶² was published in 1903, featuring promotional photographs of characters (captions provide the name of the character and not the actor) and scenes from the play accompanying the unabridged text. The book is bound in green with the title in gold lettering, and on the front cover is a photograph of Ben-Hur in charioteer costume, framed in gold. The depiction of his charioteer persona (as opposed to Jewish prince, galley slave, Roman aristocrat, or Christian convert) also suggests that audiences of the stageplay cultivated a special interest in the secular element of spectacle.

¹⁵⁸ 'Archaeology of "Ben Hur": Klaw and Erlanger's Absolute Fidelity to Scientific Research' (18 February 1906). *Gazette* (Fort Wayne). *Ben-Hur* Scrapbook, NYPL.

¹⁵⁹ "'Ben Hur" Continues to Attract Large Audiences...' (18 March 1907). *Star* (Nyack), NYPL.

¹⁶⁰ Letter to Susan Wallace from J.L. Clarke (5 July 1906). Wallace MSS. II. 1906, LL.

¹⁶¹ Located at IHS.

¹⁶² Located at IHS.

This is exhibited by another attempt to initiate fans of the onstage spectacle into the novel's readership community. In 1908 (after Wallace's death) Harper and Brothers produced *The Chariot Race from Ben-Hur*.¹⁶³ The book is bound in purple with gold lettering, and has a dynamic cover image of Ben-Hur driving his chariot between rows of Corinthian columns, with huge dust clouds billowing behind him. He faces the reader, as if he is driving the chariot out of the book. The book is divided into ten chapters, namely segments of the novel pertaining to the chariot race (for instance, 'Training for the Race', 'Ben-Hur Sees his Enemy', and 'Ben-Hur Tries the Horses'). Some chapters include prints of paintings by Sigismond Ivanowski. These strands of textual evolution can be interpreted as a representation of, and a response to, new relationships American communities of reception, and more specifically emotional communities of reception, expected to have with Wallace's novel after the circulation of the Klaw and Erlanger production.

Ben-Hur's (1880) receiving communities, secular and religious, by virtue of their joint exposure to the same dramatic adaptation in the same venue (the theatre), gained a greater awareness of one another. In any given audience various communities of reception would have been represented, and their emotional responses to the novel would have been reinforced, challenged, or transformed through the animation and vivification of Wallace's story onstage. This social heterogeneity in spectatorship allowed habitual theatregoers to observe the transformation of some Christian audience members into a 'congregation'. Although the Klaw and Erlanger *Ben-Hur* (1899-1920) was undoubtedly the performance adaptation of Wallace's novel that reached the highest number of viewers for the longest period of time by far, other performed texts of *Ben-Hur* were in circulation, and show the engagement of *Ben-Hur*'s reception history with the complex picture of popular entertainment consumption at the turn of the twentieth century.

3.5. ALTERNATIVES TO KLAU AND ERLANGER: KALEM STUDIOS' *BEN-HUR* (1907)

This section aims to address the issue of the ongoing circulation of alternative, unauthorised versions, or fragments, of Wallace's novel in various performance media alongside the circulation of the Klaw and Erlanger stageplay. The focal text will be Kalem Studios' *Ben-Hur* (1907). Although the circulation of this film was short-lived,

¹⁶³ Located at IHS.

the survival of the film text and evidence of its promotion and reception allow for a study of a performance text of *Ben-Hur* that offered audiences an alternative level of engagement with Wallace's narrative (particularly the spectacular elements) through the medium of early narrative cinema.¹⁶⁴

Productions of unauthorised *tableaux* performances, live readings, and stereopticon shows were staged persistently during the years *Ben-Hur in Dramatic Tableaux and Pantomime* was the sole performed text in circulation authorised by Wallace and Harper and Brothers.¹⁶⁵ Pirated, stripped-down versions of the Klaw and Erlanger production were staged by touring 'tent repertoire companies'.¹⁶⁶ At one point Frank Oakes Rose, General Stage Director of the famous pyrodrama production company, Pain, created a plan to produce 'Ben-Hur: Pyro-Spectacular Dramatization of General Lew Wallace's Great Work'.¹⁶⁷

As was standard for pyrodramas, Rose's script draft has little dialogue or plot description, but presents an elaborate vision for the featured visual effects,¹⁶⁸ offering detailed instructions for set design, and ubiquitous mentions of music and dance numbers. Scenes include the 'Meeting of the Magi', the 'Vision of the Nativity', 'A Star in the East', 'The Circus at Antioch', 'The Dancing Girls of Daphne', and an unnamed scene which is understood to be the Crucifixion, although there is no Christ mentioned. As there is no clear evidence that this pyrodrama was performed, and this script survives in type-written draft form in Wallace's papers in the Lilly Library, it would not be farfetched to assume that Wallace, or the holder of the dramatic rights to *Ben-Hur* at the time, refused Rose the right to stage this performance. Rose served as co-director of the 1907 Kalem film alongside Sidney Olcott, but due to the missing date and the lack of mention of this document in secondary scholarship, it is unclear whether this direction was before or after he developed this script draft for an independent pyrodrama that, unlike the Kalem film, included points of both secular and religious appeal.¹⁶⁹ In any case, it can be observed that there were in circulation a variety of alternative performance media productions of Wallace's novel at the turn of the century.

¹⁶⁴ Copies of the one-reel, approximately fifteen-minute *Ben-Hur* (1907) film reside in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Library of Congress (Solomon, 2013: 201).

¹⁶⁵ See discussion of 'stage performances' as a manifestation of readers' responses to the novel in Chapter 2, Section 4. See also Morsberger and Morsberger (1980: 454-5).

¹⁶⁶ McNamara (1999) 380.

¹⁶⁷ Rose, F. (undated). 'Scenario: Ben-Hur: Pyro-Spectacular Dramatization of General Lew Wallace's Great Work'. Wallace MSS. II n.d., LL.

¹⁶⁸ Rabinovitz (2012) 53.

¹⁶⁹ Solomon (2013b: 195) does mention that the 1935 obituary for Henry Pain mentions a Pain production of 'The Chariot Race of Ben Hur'. However, he attributes this mention to the chariot race sequence

Scholarship on the 1907 Kalem *Ben-Hur* tends to focus primarily on the copyright issues associated with it, particularly the lawsuit that resulted from Kalem's production of *Ben-Hur* without the permission of the copyright holders. Together, Harper Publishing and exhibitors Klaw and Erlanger sued Kalem for infringement of copyright, and won; Kalem had to pay \$25,000 for committing violation of copyright. Jon Solomon describes the Circuit Court Judge's identification of the specific source of the infringement, namely the definition of motion pictures as belonging to pantomime and 'therefore subject to the copyright guidelines established for theatrical productions'.¹⁷⁰ This ruling would set an important precedent for the copyright regulations under which films needed to operate from that point onwards, and thus Solomon emphasises, 'ultimately the film itself was not nearly so influential as the legal decisions it engendered'.¹⁷¹ As a result of the legal situation, *Ben-Hur* (1907) was shown little more than 500 times within a period of ten to twenty weeks before it was pulled from exhibition venues.¹⁷²

Promotional campaign

Advertisements for the film show the promoters' interest in associating *Ben-Hur* (1907) with other circulating popular entertainment forms involving the performance of spectacle. A December 1907 advertisement from trade magazine *The Moving Picture World* features an illustrated image of a racing chariot underneath the bold title. The list of production credits begins with the line, 'Scenery and Supers by Pain's Fireworks Co., Manhattan Beach, N.Y.'. The company responsible for the pyrodrama, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, which was performed on Coney Island for up to 10,000 spectators per showing, receives top recognition in this advertisement. The indication of a relationship between the literary source and the adaptation as a spectacular synthesis of various modes of popular entertainment is apparent here.¹⁷³ The absence of a reference to the Klaw and Erlanger production suggests the rivalry between early cinema and the theatrical productions from which it was derived.

within the Kalem film, which, he speculates, was a Pain contribution. There is no mention here of plans for an independent Pain production of *Ben-Hur*.

¹⁷⁰ Solomon (2013b) 202.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid. Throughout the film's run from December 1907 through February 1908, the primary, if not the only, type of exhibition venue for *Ben-Hur* would have been a nickelodeon, 'the first independent exhibition outlet for films' (Hansen, 1991a: 16), which had become commonplace by 1905.

¹⁷³ Hansen (1991a: 44-5) and Mayer (2009: 42) emphasise the composition of early narrative cinema as in part a derivation from the format of variety shows, vaudeville, and other forms of popular entertainment circulating throughout the late nineteenth century and into the first decade of the twentieth century.

The list of scenes from the film (transcribed below) is preceded by titles underscoring the excellence of the production as a spectacle: ‘A Roman Spectacle: Positively the most superb moving picture spectacle ever produced in America’.¹⁷⁴

‘In Sixteen Magnificent Scenes with Illustrated Titles’.

Jerusalem Rebels at Roman Mis-rule

The Family of Hur

An Unfortunate Accident

Wounding of the Procurator

Ben Hur in Chains to the Galleys

Ben Hur adopted by Arrias [sic] and proclaimed a Roman Citizen

Ben Hur and Messala—The Challenge

The Chariot Race

1. GRAND TRIUMPHAL ENTRY OF CHARIOT AND ATHLETES

2. THE START

3. FIRST TIME BY

4. SECOND TIME BY

5. THE DASH FOR THE FINISH

6. THE FINISH

BEN HUR — VICTOR

The breakdown of scenes from the chariot race sequence listed in this advertisement invites prospective viewers’ anticipation that the melodramatic *tableaux* involving Ben-Hur’s sentencing, rescue of Arrius (‘Arrias’ as he is named here), and adoption as a Roman citizen precede the ‘main event’ of this film, the chariot race, which has a self-contained narrative sequence. This film, like many one-reel narrative films of this period based upon literary or dramatic storylines,¹⁷⁵ is advertised for its ‘variety turns’. The advertisement contains the additional promise of the film’s potential to incorporate the thrilling immediacy of pyrodrama, and, more implicitly, to rival the live chariot race of the Klaw and Erlanger production. The promotional campaign thus emphasised the film’s selective rendering of events in Wallace’s novel that enhances the emotional immediacy of spectacular material and downplays the importance of plot progression and character development, and entirely omits the religious material.

¹⁷⁴ ‘A Roman Spectacle’ (December 1907). *Moving Picture World*, 649, MHP. See Solomon (2013b: 197-8) for discrepancies between the film text and the information about the film reported in this advertisement. Such misrepresentations exemplify the distinction between film promoters and film producers during this period.

¹⁷⁵ Mayer (2009) 42. Production companies would often draw from ‘literary, historical, and biblical sources’ for their film narratives, allowing the cultural familiarity with, and respect for, those sources to encourage public perception of film as a source of instruction, education, and moral uplift in the citizenry (Hansen, 1991a: 64).

Emotions in the film text

The narrative structure of *Ben-Hur* (1907),¹⁷⁶ like that of many other film adaptations of literary and dramatic sources produced in the first decade of the twentieth century, is characterised by what Ted Hovet terms ‘textual fragmentation’.¹⁷⁷ Film historians, including Janet Staiger, Tom Gunning, and David Mayer have offered similar observations concerning the problem of narrative cohesion in film adaptations of popular novels and films produced during this period, and comment that the filmmakers would likely have expected audiences to have gained exposure to the entirety of the story from the medium from which the film was adapted.¹⁷⁸ Gunning adds that these films tend to showcase ‘peak moments’ (in the case of *Ben-Hur*, the chariot race) from the stories they adapt, and establishment of the narrative continuity is thus not a primary concern.¹⁷⁹

This double-edged phenomenon of fragmentation—the film text itself as an arrangement of fragments of one original story, and the film text’s interaction with other contemporary performance media which in themselves demonstrate a fragmented, or partial textual adaptation—is problematic for an analysis of invitations for audiences’ emotional engagement in *Ben-Hur* (1907). Janet Staiger proposes that in order to understand historical spectators’ interpretation of a film, instead of reading the film text in isolation, scholars should ‘attempt a historical explanation of the event of interpreting a text’ that involves the use of primary sources to reconstruct the viewing context and the spectator’s relationship to it.¹⁸⁰

Yet, an attempt to apply Staiger’s model to a reading of *Ben-Hur* (1907) entails a reconstruction of spectators’ viewing experience during a period in which there existed a high degree of variability in the conditions under which the film was screened. Contemporary viewers of *Ben-Hur* (1907) would have encountered the film at a nickelodeon, which provided a multi-sensory exhibition experience that differed among individual exhibition venues. Generally, nickelodeons featured ‘egalitarian seating, continuous admission’, and continuous screening of one-reel films, sometimes with live variety acts interspersed, that audiences could enjoy

¹⁷⁶ See Solomon (2013b: 198-200) for a comprehensive summary of the film’s content with some analytical commentary.

¹⁷⁷ Hovet (2001) 286.

¹⁷⁸ Staiger (1992: 104); Mayer (2009: 50); Gunning (1994: 39).

¹⁷⁹ Gunning (1994) 39.

¹⁸⁰ Staiger (1992) 81.

without compromising a good deal of money or time.¹⁸¹ Miriam Hansen comments on the live performance component of the nickelodeon—musical accompaniment, sound effects, and sometimes lectures that took place alongside screenings and ‘gave the audience a sense of collective presence’.¹⁸² The diversity of circumstances in the exhibition atmosphere undoubtedly would have influenced the audience’s reading of the film text.¹⁸³ For this reason, scholars tend to exercise caution in analysing likely contemporary interpretations of story films (many of which are ‘fragmented’) produced during this period in isolation from known exhibition conditions.¹⁸⁴

Only very few contemporary sources document individual exhibitions of *Ben-Hur* (1907). Despite the paucity of information available to reconstruct a particular screening, the film text survives, and in itself can provide valuable information about the means by which it consistently represents emotions and invites affective engagement from spectators through strategies of cinematic language (particularly camerawork, editing, and mise-en-scène). In particular, the combination of deep staging with long camera angles and the use of crowds invites audiences to develop an alternative means of emotional engagement with the melodramatic and spectacular excerpts from Wallace’s narrative featured in the film. The ubiquitous employment of these techniques invites spectators to experience the narrative from a new vantage point (that of the embedded spectator), and to reflect on their own placement in the audience at a nickelodeon, which, like the spectatorial crowds on screen, is mobile, emotionally responsive, and eager for spectacle and ‘variety turns’.

In the first scene, ‘Jerusalem Rebels at Roman Mis-Rule’, the camera maintains a static long shot of people walking in various directions, until a figure appears in the background on the left side of the frame, wearing a knee-length tunic with a dyed border, and a long cape. The people face him while he advances toward

¹⁸¹ Hansen (1991a) 61. The audience capacity for a nickelodeon was normally between 200 and 500. Butsch (2000: 142) mentions that these numbers were consistent with theatre licensing laws for numbers of spectators.

¹⁸² Hansen (1991a) 43. Gunning (2004: 150) observes that a lecturer served ‘a major role in defining the film experiences for early audiences...[as] a solution to the crisis in narrative comprehensibility’. Yet evidence neither in contemporary sources nor in secondary scholarship suggests a lecturer’s presence at an exhibition of *Ben-Hur* (1907).

¹⁸³ Contemporary industry discourse demonstrates an awareness of this: ‘Where vaudeville is interspersed with the pictures, the act preceding a picture has an effect upon its reception...the musical accompaniment differs greatly, and the possibilities of appropriate and well-rendered music to make or mar a picture is indeed very evident to one who sees the same picture in different houses’ (‘Commenting on the Films’ (15 April 1911). *Moving Picture World*. 814, MHP).

¹⁸⁴ For instance, see Janet Staiger’s (1992: 105-123) reading of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1903).

the foreground. They raise their arms up and incline their bodies toward him fluidly and collectively, as if they constitute a human wave breaking upon the man standing to the right side of the frame. A summary of the film published in *Moving Picture World* describes the crowd's demonstration of an 'attitude of approval [which] shows that Roman mis-rule in Jerusalem has reached its climax'.¹⁸⁵

In this scene emerges the filmmakers' interest in portraying power dynamics associated with an individual's persuasion of a collective, and a more general emphasis on the function of the crowd as an influential determinant of the emotional tone of a scene.¹⁸⁶ This reading is repeatedly endorsed by the film summary in *Moving Picture World*, which attributes emotions to the gestural acting of crowds, from the people of Jerusalem ('approval'), witnesses of Ben-Hur's adoption ('acclamation'), and witnesses of Ben-Hur's acceptance of Messala's challenge to race against him ('delight'). Peter Brooks acknowledges early silent cinema's use of 'a certain semiotics of the body' from melodrama, and later characterises uses of the body as 'a place for the inscription of highly emotional messages that cannot be written elsewhere, and cannot be articulated verbally'.¹⁸⁷

The episodes documenting the events that bring Ben-Hur toward the 'main event' of the film—the chariot race—carry compositional elements similar to those observed in the opening scene, namely the central focus of the crowd, and the placement of the protagonist in the background. For instance, the scene of Ben-Hur's adoption consists mostly of the gradual assembly of toga-clad people before an elaborately painted backdrop of the Roman forum. The adoption occurs when Ben-Hur and Arrius walk through the crowd and up the stairs of a dais, positioned in the background and to the right of the frame, while the people stand in the foreground at street level, gazing up and bowing to Ben-Hur in adulation. This deep staging with elevation documents the social ascension of Ben-Hur. While Ben-Hur stands in the background, the motioning of the crowd, and the positioning of the stairs at the centre of the frame, rising toward the right, draws the viewer's eye toward him.¹⁸⁸ The borrowing of this staging technique from melodrama is particularly appreciable when this scene (Fig. 3.8) is compared with a photograph

¹⁸⁵ 'Film Review' (December 1907). *Moving Picture World*, 651, MHP.

¹⁸⁶ Hovet (2001: 284) describes the use of crowds in *Ben-Hur* (1907) for purposes of plot development during scenes when the action occurring within the frame in a long shot with a complex depth of field is potentially unclear.

¹⁸⁷ Brooks (1994) 11, 22.

¹⁸⁸ This positioning of actors resembles Mayer's (2009: 91) descriptions of D.W. Griffith's use of upstage/downstage placement of actors to enhance the spatial appearance of interior sets in his early narrative films.

(Fig. 3.9) from the Souvenir Album of the Klaw and Erlanger play depicting the crowd of supernumeraries filling the foreground and gesturing their celebration of the victory of Ben-Hur, who stands elevated in the background left.



Fig. 3.8: Adoption scene (Kalem *Ben-Hur*, 1907)



Fig. 3.9: Arena celebration (Klaw and Erlanger *Ben-Hur* Souvenir Album, 1900)

The crowd performs two additional functions in *Ben-Hur* (1907). Firstly, the crowd emerges as a primary ‘character’ in itself, and in almost every scene other than the opening scene in Jerusalem, the role of the crowd is defined by collective spectatorship. During the chariot race, the crowd is the primary object of the camera’s attention, since the race is filmed with a static camera that captures the spectators’ reactions to the race in the background, while the group of four chariots gallops rapidly through the frame in the foreground. Of the roughly one minute and ten second duration of the chariot race, the visibility of chariots in the frame only comprises around fifteen seconds. The presence of the crowd of onlookers in scenes with a focus on melodramatic plot events renders these episodes public, and quasi-spectacular. For instance, the scene of Ben-Hur’s adoption is presented in the public sphere of the Roman forum; in the Klaw and Erlanger stageplay it is the result of the intimate conversation between Arrius and Ben-Hur on the raft as they await rescue after the naval battle.¹⁸⁹ The carefully choreographed movement of the crowd also operates as a semiotic determinant of the emotional tone of the scene—not only does the crowd see, but the crowd affectively responds, through gesture, to what is being seen, and invites the audience to experience a range of emotional responses in the act of viewing.¹⁹⁰

It is also important to acknowledge contemporary cinematic narration strategies that are *not* used in the film, a consideration that may enhance the hermeneutic significance of the techniques discussed above, from the perspective of

¹⁸⁹ Young, reproduced in Mayer (1994: 225).

¹⁹⁰ See Gunning (1994: 106-7) for early narrative film’s borrowing of gesture from stage melodrama to express emotions in acting style.

contemporary audiences. Perhaps most striking is the absence of parallel editing (in the chariot race sequence particularly), which allows the camera to move between separate spaces within the same scene, and was frequently employed in chase and action sequences in early narrative film in order to create suspense and urgency.¹⁹¹ Instead, several isolated takes of the crowd in the background gesturing toward the right are edited together, before the chariots run directly across the frame in the foreground, from the right to the left. Ted Hovet claims that the editing of these takes compromises the sense of the race's chronological progression in favour of the opportunity to display the chariots,¹⁹² yet there is definitely, as the *Moving Picture World* advertisement promises, a distinct 'race to the finish' in the final take, where two chariots, almost neck and neck, gallop past the camera. Still, there is not a high level of general suspense created by the visual composition of the chariot race—this is much more clearly visible in the crowd's gesticulated expressions.

It cannot be determined with certainty whether contemporary audiences would have expected more of a kinetic quality in the editing of shots during a time when filmmakers were developing methods of diversifying the audience's perspective and relationship to embedded spectatorship, an element characteristic of the cinema of attractions.¹⁹³ Nevertheless, the camera's sustained attention to the playing out of a narrative within a consistent space, even when the narrative progression includes a 'variety turn' with a primarily spectacular focus (the chariot race), has the overall effect of contextualising the spectacle within the narrative continuity. This is underscored when the chariot race is followed by the final scene, in which Ben-Hur, victorious, receives the adulation of the crowd while Messala, borne on a stretcher, looks on disappointedly. This tension between the immediacy of spectacle and the progression of the narrative sequence appears to be symptomatic of an observation Tom Gunning has made regarding the vestiges of the cinema of attractions within early narrative film of this period: 'The desire to display may interact with the desire to tell a story, and part of the challenge of early film analysis lies in tracing the interaction of attractions and narrative

¹⁹¹ Gunning (1994) 96-7.

¹⁹² Hovet (2001) 289.

¹⁹³ 'Cinema of attractions' is a specific term introduced by film historians Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault to indicate early (pre-1908) cinema's primary aim to display an interesting sight or object for a spectator rather than to narrate a story, a manifestation of a cultural 'fascination with novelty' during that period (Gunning, 1996: 73).

organization...'.¹⁹⁴ For Gunning, 'attractions foreground the role of the spectator', but in the case of *Ben-Hur* (1907), where the style of editing and camerawork downplays the perspectival versatility of the spectator, the role of the onscreen spectators *is* foregrounded. While audiences of *Ben-Hur* are not placed directly behind the eyes of the spectators onscreen, they are nevertheless to some extent encouraged to align themselves with the onscreen crowd, and to reflect upon their identity as a collective body of spectators at the nickelodeon.

The absence of 'A Tale of the Christ' is perhaps the most obvious manifestation of *Ben-Hur* (1907) as a fragmented text, yet this may not have been problematic to contemporary audiences familiar with Wallace's novel and the Klaw and Erlanger stageplay. There was significant popular demand for versions of the *Ben-Hur* narrative that excluded the religious episodes (to which Harper and Brothers responded with their 1908 publication, *The Chariot Race from Ben-Hur*).¹⁹⁵ This does not necessarily indicate an abandonment of consumer interest in the religious dimension of Wallace's story.¹⁹⁶ *Ben-Hur* (1907) compartmentalises interest in a specialised point of appeal within what was by then acknowledged as a widely familiar narrative. The film emerged as one of a large collection of *Ben-Hur* 'fragments',¹⁹⁷ each of which communicated aspects of Wallace's narrative that carried a clear definition of intended appeal for audiences (hence the advertising campaign for *Ben-Hur* as a 'Roman Spectacle'). With Christ's absence, the viewer's sympathy with the psychological and spiritual transformation of the protagonist is not solicited. Instead, it is the events of Ben-Hur's journey through condemnation, social ascendance, and triumph over his foe the audience is invited to witness collectively, with special interest in the immediacy of spectacle.

Audience responses

Surviving documentation in industry publications *Variety* and *The Moving Picture World* related to the exhibition, spectatorship patterns, and industry commentary associated with *Ben-Hur* (1907) carries only a few indications of audience activity at

¹⁹⁴ Gunning (1996) 73.

¹⁹⁵ Hovet (2001) 287-8.

¹⁹⁶ Nor should the absence of the Christian material from *Ben-Hur* (1907) lead to the assumption that Christ did not appear in cinema during this period. In fact, between 1907 and 1908, Pathé's *Passion Play La Vie et Passion de Notre Seigneur Jésus Christ* was the 'most viewed picture in America', and its circulation in American exhibition venues is documented through 1910 (Shepherd, 2013a: 63).

¹⁹⁷ Evidence of these appear in the same industry publications that promote and review *Ben-Hur* (1907). For instance, 'Josselyn's panorama of Ben-Hur' in Boston is advertised in the same issue of *Variety* (4 January 1908, 9(4), 27. MHP) as the Kalem film.

the nickelodeon prior to the film's recall from exhibition venues.¹⁹⁸ In this period there do not yet appear critical readings of films, but film journalists are interested in describing the collective audience response to films observable at specific screenings.¹⁹⁹ The January 1908 issue of *Variety* reports the success of *Ben-Hur* at the Edisonio in San Antonio, Texas: 'Ben-Hur caught on big and proved a big money getter'.²⁰⁰ In February 1908, *Moving Picture World* featured *Ben-Hur* in its discussion of films circulating in American nickelodeons that had received a particularly high number of spectators at particular screenings: "Ben-Hur" drew such crowds to a theater in Atlanta, Ga., that the police had to aid in clearing the aisles and lobby'.²⁰¹ These testimonies, although brief, indicate that *Ben-Hur* (1907) was not just another film playing at the nickelodeon for spectators to encounter by happenstance; it drew mass audiences.

Attention is diverted away from audiences and toward the studio and the industry as a whole, when coverage of the lawsuit against Kalem begins in March 1908, in sources produced within and outside of the film industry, including *Variety*, *Moving Picture World*, and the *New York Times*.²⁰² A *Variety* report alludes to the gravity of the consequences this case held for the industry: '...in the interest of the general trade [Kalem] will defend the suit. Should such a point be decided against the moving picture manufacturers it would be impossible to reproduce scenes from any copyrighted book or dramatic performance without consent.'²⁰³ The outcome of the suit against Kalem would result in an absence of *Ben-Hur* from American cinema until 1925, when the nascent MGM Studios produced the \$4 million film version under the direction of Fred Niblo (discussed in Chapter 4).

Ben-Hur (1907) is a testament to the complexity of performance narratives of Wallace's novel circulating alongside the exhibition of the Klaw and Erlanger stageplay. The fragmentation of the narrative continuity of this particular film, even when read as an onscreen portrayal of exclusively melodramatic and spectacular elements of Wallace's novel, depended upon audiences' prior familiarity with the stage and literary versions of the story to resolve. Yet the lack of self-reported responses to the film text, the paucity of descriptions of specific screenings, and recent scholarly suspicion of the accuracy of published reports of audiences' socioeconomic makeup and

¹⁹⁸ Richard Butsch (2012: 110) demonstrates scepticism about the accuracy of industry reports of spectatorship patterns.

¹⁹⁹ Hidalgo (2012: 215) attributes this to early critics' role as 'representatives of public opinion'.

²⁰⁰ Cohen, C. (4 January 1908). *Variety*, MHP.

²⁰¹ 'Pictures That Draw' (1 February 1908). *Moving Picture World* 2 (5), 76. MHP.

²⁰² Solomon (2013b: 201) writes that according to the *New York Times* article, the suit was brought against Kalem 13 March 1908, and the US Circuit Court's decision against the studio was made 5 May.

²⁰³ 'Foreign Filmmakers Combine to Press Fight' (21 March 1908) *Variety*, 10 (2), 14. MHP.

viewing behaviour during this period²⁰⁴ only makes the definition of audiences' emotional engagement with *Ben-Hur* (1907) more uncertain. Yet, a case can be made for paying special attention to the film's borrowings from other performance media, notable instances of tension with Wallace/Klaw and Erlanger, and use and omission of contemporary film conventions associated with representing emotions onscreen, in order to determine some key ways in which audiences who went to the nickelodeon for the purpose of seeing *Ben-Hur* (1907) would have been invited to participate emotionally. The inclusion of the Kalem film within this chapter on the development of *Ben-Hur* as a performed text enhances the argument for a growing tension between the demands among audiences to experience the story as purely a spectacle, purely a narrative journey toward a resolution in Christian moral uplift, or a balanced combination of the two, with the careful avoidance of the performance of Christ's suffering and Crucifixion.

The desire to experience the iconic moments of *Ben-Hur* in a new and technologically distinct way did not abate, and one reason for this may be that these performed texts, including the long-running Klaw and Erlanger production, were for the individual spectator ultimately transitory. They were performed for a limited time before they either were retired, or, in the case of the Klaw and Erlanger stageplay, they moved onto the next city in the tour, after which point it might be years before their return. The perpetuation of *Ben-Hur* in performance, whether authorised or unauthorised, can be viewed as a response to an enduring desire among consumers of popular entertainment in a variety of forms (for by the early twentieth century consumers were all but conditioned to envision entertainment as a 'variety', cross-and-inter-medial experience)²⁰⁵ to engage meaningfully with Wallace's story.

3.6. CONCLUSION

The period within which performed texts of Wallace's novel were developed (1889-1920) witnessed a major transformation in predominant patterns of audience engagement with the narrative. *Ben-Hur in Dramatic Tableaux and Pantomime* and the Klaw and Erlanger *Ben-Hur* continued to bring Wallace's narrative to audiences from various regional and social backgrounds, as the novel had done previously, but through new, multi-sensory media. The Klaw and Erlanger play, according to contemporary

²⁰⁴ Butsch (2012) 110.

²⁰⁵ Mayer (2009: 38-9); McNamara (1999: 380-1).

reviews, spearheaded the development of a new performance genre, the 'religious drama', wherein 'high' ethical dilemmas and 'low' spectacle met onstage, and engaged the interest of middle-class patrons of realistic 'New Drama', as well as Christian populations who had not been to the theatre before. Kalem's 1907 film appeared in nickelodeons, encouraging further social heterogeneity in the patronage, and drawing the attention of audiences interested in pyrodrama and outdoor entertainments.

The Klaw and Erlanger stageplay was a fixture in American popular entertainment for over two decades, and was instrumental in furthering the association of the name of *Ben-Hur* with American cultural identity, through the reinforcement of a Christian origin narrative by means of a re-enactment of Wallace's story. The pantomimic scenes in the Klaw and Erlanger play of the Magi sighting the Christmas Star, and Christ's healing of the lepers were interpreted by many Christian viewers as just as, if not more, effective than a sermon for the collective experience of worship they invited spectators to have in the theatre. Throughout this time, the novel *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880) did not cease to be compared with the Bible, in terms of the moral and spiritual lessons it offered its readers. The author's self-professed reverential relationship with *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880) came to be perceived as a significant source for the emotional engagement of many readers, and Klaw and Erlanger strove to invoke this relationship in their promotion of the play.

The elaborate and immersive aesthetic detail in sets, lighting, costume design, and the musical score were used to plunge the viewer into the slave galley, the Grove of Daphne, the Orchard of Palms, and the Circus of Antioch, and enhanced the level of emotional engagement spectators were invited to have with these secular scenes. The vivification of Oriental splendour, the thrill of the physical presence of racing chariots onstage, the atmospheric musical and dance numbers, and the dark allure and playful irreverence of Iras were cited as focal points for the experience of being transported through time and space to ancient and exotic spaces which stimulate the imagination and the emotions.

The reviews, advertisements, and box office reports discussed in this chapter indicate that the Klaw and Erlanger production made a lasting impression on its viewers. While for the most part the individual testimonies that characterised reader responses to the novel (see Chapter 2) are missing for the dramatic production, the sources published in regional newspapers and nationwide periodicals from the perspectives of the exhibitors and professional critics served a significant role in fostering the growth of specific patterns of emotional engagement with the play, and

representing communities of reception defined by emotional experience (particularly church communities).

The lasting enthusiasm for the Klaw and Erlanger production among American audiences came to be promoted as a significant historical event in United States history. In August 1906, six different newspapers (Nashville, Tennessee; Grand Rapids Michigan; Boston, Massachusetts; New Orleans, Louisiana; Spokane, Washington; and Perth Amboy, New Jersey) report, 'More people have seen "Ben Hur" than constituted the entire population of the thirteen original states at the outbreak of the War of the Revolution'.²⁰⁶ Across the United States Americans were reading about *Ben-Hur* onstage as a distinctly American phenomenon, which had inspired the ongoing devotion of a national community of audience members.

These surviving sources also provide a fairly cohesive perspective on shifting social, cultural, and regional contexts within which the Klaw and Erlanger production, and to some extent the Kalem film, were operating. In the mid-1910s, when narrative film was on the rise, advertisements for the Klaw and Erlanger *Ben-Hur* acknowledged the rivalry between onstage and onscreen entertainment.²⁰⁷ These advertisements were accompanied by notices in large letters which read, 'NOT A MOVING PICTURE... You see on the stage 350 LIVING ACTORS and actresses. You see in "Ben-Hur" 20 LIVING HORSES in the great chariot race'.²⁰⁸ Chapter 4 will explore the challenges of representing and soliciting emotions in the adaptation of *Ben-Hur* for feature film, and for a new generation of cinemagoers, in MGM's *Ben-Hur* (1925). A study of this adaptation will reveal that, despite Klaw and Erlanger's careful handling of the religious material for a growing secular audience, certain authorial challenges, such as the negotiation of balance between Christ's humanity and divinity, and the struggle to create realistic spectacle by means of technological artifice, were not over.

²⁰⁶ 'More people have seen "Ben Hur" than constituted the entire population of the 13 original states of the outbreak of the War of the Revolution'. (16 August 1906). *Nashville American*. *Ben-Hur* Scrapbook, NYPL.

²⁰⁷ Although Mayer (2009: 31) argues that during the period before 1925 narrative film exhibits 'a gradual and fitful attempt to replicate the products and strategies of the commercial stage'.

²⁰⁸ 'The Burning Christians—That Amused Nero'. (28 December 1916). *New York Journal*, NYPL.

CHAPTER 4: EMOTIONS IN MGM'S *BEN-HUR* (1925): PRODUCTION, TEXT, AND RECEPTION

4.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter will investigate the means by which MGM's silent film *Ben-Hur* (1925) invited and generated patterns of emotional engagement from American audiences through its cinematic rendering of Wallace's novel. To some extent, the Klaw and Erlanger stageplay should also be considered as an influence on this film's interpretation of *Ben-Hur*, since Abraham Erlanger had a certain degree of creative control as a producer of the film.¹ *Ben-Hur* (1925), with its careful balance of reverential religious sequences, the technologically robust spectacle of the naval battle and the chariot race, and the love story that featured Ramon Novarro, Hollywood's newfound 'ethnic lover' in the title role,² channeled the public interest that over the course of the stageplay's circulation had been gradually shifting toward a greater enthusiasm for the *non*-religious aspects of Wallace's narrative.³

Contemporary reviews of *Ben-Hur* (1925) suggest the key to the successful balance of various aesthetic and thematic drives in the film was the continuous immersion of the spectator into a multi-sensory experience of every major atmospheric level of the story (spectacle, religion, historical romance). The *New York Times*, covering the premiere screening of the film in December 1925, commented on the emotional immediacy of the Via Dolorosa sequence: 'When the march to Calvary is depicted it is done with such solemnity and quiet respect that one feels impelled to bow one's head.'⁴ Edwin Schallert, writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, expressed similarly, '[the film's] hold upon the public could be traced to one thing only and that was the character of its electrical spirituality'.⁵ A *Boston Daily Globe* reviewer underscored the audience responses to the chariot race sequence during a screening at the Colonial Theatre: 'The chariot race...was accompanied by hand-clapping, excited squeals from

¹ See Section 2 for the conflict between Erlanger and other members of the production staff concerning the portrayal of Christ in the film.

² Wayne (2004) 416-17.

³ See Chapter 3, Section 4. This shift in public interest with the entrance of *Ben-Hur* into performance media is also discussed in Miller (2008: 162-8).

⁴ Hall, M. (31 December 1925). 'A Stupendous Spectacle'. *New York Times*, APD.

⁵ Schallert, E. (1926). Untitled review of *Ben-Hur*. *Los Angeles Times*. *Ben-Hur* Scrapbook 8: 94-5. AMPAS.

the women in the audience, and a triumphant burst of applause at the conclusion. So excited did the audience become that one might have believed that the actual race was being run off the stage of the Colonial Theatre'.⁶ This remark concerning the realism of the chariots on the screen functions as a nod to the film's ability to surpass even the realism of the live horses onstage in the Klaw and Erlanger production,⁷ for whose exhibition the Colonial Theatre had originally been opened in December 1900.⁸

At the time of writing, there is very little in the scholarship on film history or classical reception studies in the way of a sustained study of the film *Ben-Hur* (1925), whether by means of a thorough account of its production, a close reading of the film, or a survey of its reception history. This may seem surprising, considering that *Ben-Hur* is considered to be one of the films, if not *the* film whose critical and box office success determined the nascent MGM Studios' survival in the Hollywood film industry, which by the mid-1920s had become a highly competitive business dominated by a few major players.⁹ In classical reception studies, Niblo's production is most often discussed briefly as a forerunner to MGM's 1959 *Ben-Hur*, which emerges in scholarship as a critical point of discussion both in the study of American perceptions of ancient Rome during the Cold War era, and in the identification of cinematic conventions for the representation of ancient Rome onscreen that has informed major Hollywood productions from Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960) to Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000).¹⁰

These relatively brief discussions of *Ben-Hur* (1925) usually feature valuations of the film's importance to the tradition of representing Wallace's novel onscreen with grandiosity (through consideration of the film's \$4 million budget, or its innovative use of forty-two cameras to film the chariot race scene).¹¹ Within the last ten years, however, there has been an effort to engage more deeply with this film and its contemporary cultural impact, and to offer the first substantial close readings of it on the levels of its character and plot development, major themes, and the ways in which it negotiated the narrative of Wallace's novel through a medium new to the narrative tradition of *Ben-Hur*, for a new generation of consumers.¹² This recent scholarship is

⁶ "'Ben-Hur' Pictured at the Colonial' (Feb 23, 1926). *Boston Daily Globe*, 18. *Ben-Hur* Scrapbook, NYPL.

⁷ Miller (2008: 162); Morsberger and Morsberger (1980: 459).

⁸ 'The Week with the Players' (14 October 1900). *The Philadelphia Times*, 30. Newspaper Archive.

⁹ Hay (1991: 36) Gomery (2005: 33).

¹⁰ Richards (2008: 55-7); Winkler (2001: 65-73); Fitzgerald (2001).

¹¹ For example, see Richards (2008: 45). The scholarly tendency toward placing special emphasis on the logistics of this film's production appears to begin with Jon Solomon's (2001: 203-5) record.

¹² Exemplified in Williams (2012: 113-44), Scodel (2013), and Miller (2008).

oriented toward an interest in what film theorist David Bordwell terms the ‘symptomatic’ interpretation of a film, or the contemporary social and political issues that a film could be illustrating, however concretely or symbolically.¹³

Michael Williams and Ruth Scodel have drawn attention to *Ben-Hur* (1925) on account of its capacity to transform the novel’s original invitations for audiences’ engagement with characters in *Ben-Hur*. Their respective commentaries on the film’s representations of masculinity and Second Temple Judaism embodied in the protagonist Judah Ben-Hur offer an interesting perspective on the movement toward a greater scholarly concern with spectatorship.¹⁴ Key issues in the extra-cinematic cultural context that have been identified in these publications for their potential representation in the film include shifting perceptions of gender norms following the United States’ participation in the First World War and the rise of anti-Semitism in the 1920s United States (and Hollywood’s role in combating it). These interpretations represent significant contributions to the understanding of the cultural reception of *Ben-Hur* (1925) among its immediate audiences in the American context. This chapter will align itself with the emerging scholarly movement toward a meaningful qualitative analysis of this film and its cultural impact by exploring the ways in which emotions were represented in the onscreen narrative of *Ben-Hur* (1925), and the varied opportunities for emotional engagement the film offers its audiences (a narrative strategy whose efficacy is addressed by the contemporary reviews mentioned above).

Miriam Hansen argues that scholarly mindfulness of the ‘historical spectator’, and a related awareness of the socio-cultural circumstances surrounding a film’s original audience is an important means of evaluating the ways in which a film interacts with contemporary messages surrounding gender, religion, ethnicity, politics, the role of cinema within popular culture, and other salient concerns associated with the reception context.¹⁵ In previous chapters of this thesis efforts have been made to generate such contextualised readings of the various narrative incarnations of *Ben-Hur*. Yet in this chapter there will be a particular focus on the complexity of the interaction between imagined/actual spectators, the film text, and the film’s identified authors. The spectator’s engagement with the film is often explicitly referenced in the studio’s production files and in published discourse (especially fan magazines), yet there survive very few case studies of individual or collective audience responses relayed

¹³ Bordwell (1989) 13.

¹⁴ Williams (2012-113-44); Scodel (2013).

¹⁵ Hansen (1991a) 6.

independently of these publications (in contrast to the individual testimonies expressed in letters from readers to Wallace, for instance).

While this conversation between the studio and the spectator may seem one-sided, fan magazines as *objects* of consumption provide evidence of spectators' active engagement with the film beyond the initial viewing experience. Recent scholarship by Shelley Stamp attributes significant importance to such publications about films in their simultaneous capacity to represent and to shape American audience responses to films during the period of silent narrative feature film.¹⁶ Stamp argues that printed publications from this era provide us with a means of understanding collective patterns of reception amidst a 'moviegoing culture'. In the case of *Ben-Hur* (1925) it is even possible to isolate impressions of the film offered by specific communities of reception (such as the Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur or the Ramon Novarro Film Club) This material becomes even more interesting when placed in dialogue with the filmmakers' conceptions of audience responses (represented in the production files and in the film text itself), most of which the filmmakers imagine will occur in the immediate viewing context.

Anticipated and/or actual emotional responses from spectators feature crucially in the components of this chapter examining the film's composition (Section 2) and text (Section 3), and the materials documenting audiences' engagement with the film outside of the cinema (Section 4). Yet the interest in recovering the 'historical spectator' of *Ben-Hur* (1925) does not preclude the continued examination of emotions as they appear in the text according to the narrative conventions of the medium, in this case feature narrative film, through which Wallace's story is communicated. This chapter will draw upon models of emotional engagement from film theory to examine the means by which *Ben-Hur* onscreen borrows and changes the invitations for emotional engagement offered by the novel and the stageplay.

4.2. EMOTIONS, PRODUCTION PROCESS, AND THE HISTORICAL SPECTATOR

As early as 1922, after Abraham Erlanger sold the dramatic rights to Wallace's novel to Goldwyn Pictures (prior to its merging with Metro Pictures and the birth of MGM Studios in June 1924),¹⁷ *Ben-Hur* began to be advertised to prospective audiences as an

¹⁶ Stamp (2012) 193-4.

¹⁷ Flamini (1994) 63-5.

adaptation of the Klaw and Erlanger melodrama.¹⁸ David Mayer discusses the relatively straightforward transition from nineteenth-century toga plays to twentieth-century toga films, in large part due to toga films' general espousal of the melodramatic plot structure of toga drama—a villain (usually a Roman) initiates action, based on psychological motives, such as 'greed, lust, vanity, avarice, envy, ambition, jealousy, megalomania, and sadism' to disturb the peace. Then a hero, a member of the oppressed Jewish or Christian population and victim of the villain's wickedness, emerges to restore justice, sometimes by punishing the villain.¹⁹ Indeed, much of the cinematic coding of ancient Judaea in *Ben-Hur* (1925) is borrowed from Klaw and Erlanger. For instance, *Ben-Hur* (1925) stages the falling out between Ben-Hur and Messala in the Hur palace, reinforcing the 'domestic paradigm'²⁰ in Young's script, wherein historical circumstances become individualised in an emotionally-charged, personal sphere. Yet, the film's means of 'emotionalising history' (Robert Rosenstone terms this as one key tendency of historical feature films) is not limited to the domestic sphere. The public spaces in the film generally serve as the site of collective Judaeian oppression or Roman indulgence. For instance, the opening intertitles of *Ben-Hur* (1925) set the stage for the visual representation of the emotional impact of historical circumstance experienced by a *people*.²¹

Pagan Rome was at the zenith of her power. The tread of her iron legion shook the world; and from every land rose the cries of captive peoples—praying for a deliverer / In Judea the glory that was Israel's lay scattered in the dust—and Jerusalem the Golden, conquered and oppressed, wept in the shadow of her walls.

The enormous reconstruction of the Joppa Gate, captured in a long shot in the following scene, multiplies the scale of suffering defined in the intertitle. The film thus encourages the American spectator to empathise with the emotional experience (the tears) of the Judeans, a religious people (Jerusalem is 'Golden', with a reference to the Temple) who have been mercilessly conquered by the iron, *pagan* dominion of Rome. In the case of *Ben-Hur* (1925), Wallace's 'Tale of the Christ' that surrounds the melodramatic narrative and adds a moral resolution to it unlocks the narrative from the conventions of toga film.

¹⁸ Levenson, L. (18 November 1922). "'Ben-Hur' Coming to the Screen at Last'. *Movie Weekly* 2 (41), 10. MHP.

¹⁹ Mayer (1994) 4-5.

²⁰ For the function of the 'domestic paradigm' in ancient world films, see Joshel, Malamud, and Wyke (2005: 13).

²¹ Such scenes of collective oppression occurring in large spaces, captured in a wide-angle view, which are controlled by the oppressor resemble what McAlister (2005: 62) terms in her discussion of the establishment of space in *Ben-Hur* (1959) 'Imperial space'. For McAlister, 'Imperial space' 'is not space the audience is invited *into*; its excess, its staging as spectacle and display, constructs the audience as a distanced observer'.

The physical immediacy of Christ's presence, the vital component unique to *Ben-Hur* amidst nineteenth-century historical novels about the Roman Empire, yet omitted from the Klaw and Erlanger production, necessitated the filmmakers at MGM to account for the interest of a substantial number of prospective audience members who would see the film for devotional purposes.²² By the mid-1920s, corporeal depictions of Christ onscreen had lost their primary association with Passion Plays, and scenes from the life of Christ played out in Kalem Studios' *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912), and Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1923) had accrued favour with Protestant filmgoers.²³ The popular 'social gospel' movement encouraged American Protestants to perceive Christ as the idealised image of a driven, successful, charismatic male, physically muscular and vigorous. Within this movement, Christ became a model of social agency one could emulate by asking, 'What would Jesus do?' in morally ambiguous situations, thereby demonstrating a socially pragmatic approach to religious devotion.²⁴

The filmmakers at MGM exhibited a particularly high level of deliberation related to the appearance of Christ onscreen. In 1922, scenarist June Mathis, reportedly under the close supervision of Erlanger,²⁵ developed an initial screen adaptation which adhered strictly to the dramatisation, and ended with the healing of the lepers and no Crucifixion scene.²⁶ When MGM Studios took over production in June 1924, Mathis was replaced by writer Carey Wilson,²⁷ who wrote the Crucifixion into the film, and provided the 'hand of Christ' (represented by an actor) as a symbol for Christ's corporeality and acts of divine forgiveness and spiritual salvation on earth. By distancing the narrative from the Klaw and Erlanger drama, Wilson reintegrated Christ's dual human/divine nature from the novel, a dualism in which Wallace professes his belief in the first pages of his autobiography: 'The Jesus Christ in whom I believe was, in all the stages of his life, a human being. His activity was the Spirit within him, and the Spirit was God'.²⁸

²² Miller (forthcoming) describes the Christian devotional function of the Klaw and Erlanger *Ben-Hur* experienced by audience members, or sometimes whole congregations.

²³ Fox (2005) 310.

²⁴ Johnson (2008) 82. The literary culmination of this image of Christ was eventually crystallised in Bruce Barton's nonfiction work, *The Man Nobody Knows* (1925).

²⁵ 'Erlanger at Coast to Aid in Filming of "Ben-Hur"' (22 December 1922). *Exhibitor's Trade Review*, 175. MHP.

²⁶ Mathis, J. (1 December 1922). Treatment of *Ben-Hur*, 189. MGM Collection, USC.

²⁷ Wilson was a writer for MGM who had previously worked at Goldwyn Pictures (Eyman, 2005: 83).

²⁸ Wallace (1906) 2.

Bela Sekely, who worked for MGM as a writer and scenarist,²⁹ reviewed a version of Wilson's continuity (screenplay) in September 1924. In his review, Sekely praises the use of the hand as a conduit for Christ's emotional expression, offering as a comparison the physicality of emotion modelled by Italian theatre actress Eleanora Duse:

The very exigencies of the story...make the personal appearance of Christ imperative...by using the hand, the hand of Christ as a symbol of his presence. How much can be expressed by the hand has been shown by the late Duse. More than with her golden voice, more than by the marvelous [sic] play of her expressive face and eye, she could tell audiences by the use of her eloquent hands.³⁰

Duse was known for her interest in communicating to audiences the subtle (and physiological) movement of emotions within her characters, thereby encouraging audiences' affective responses to a naturalistic portrayal of fictional personae.³¹ The comparison to an actress also suggests Sekely's aesthetic preference for a feminised vision of Christ reminiscent of Wallace's portrayal, an image that was being phased out in the discourse of the contemporary social gospel movement (see above discussion). Wilson's inclusion of the hand of Christ recalls Wallace's emphasis on Christ's *humanity* as the access point for spiritual salvation—for instance, the extended meditation on Christ's facial features (*Ben-Hur*, 438-9), or the occurrence of Ben-Hur's conversion as he watches Christ undergo physical suffering and death (505-6).

The filmmakers made a special effort to embed in the course of the melodramatic narrative scenes from Christ's life in the form of *tableaux* accompanied by the relevant Bible verses in intertitles. Director of production Irving Thalberg, in a memo to director Fred Niblo written September 1924, expresses his concern for balancing the 'marvellously built-up' life of Christ with the concurrent theme of 'the suffering of the Jews'.³² It is worth considering Ruth Scodel's chapter on the portrayal of Jews in *Ben-Hur* (1925), in which she mentions that while all of the film's producers, including Thalberg, whom she credits as the primary author of the film, were Jewish (albeit non-practicing for the most part), the writers, director, and actors were not.³³ Thalberg's concern for the balance between Jewish suffering under Roman rule and Christ's healing influence reinforces Scodel's observation of elements in the film text functioning to mitigate the negative stereotyping of Jews in the popular medium of

²⁹ In 1926 Sekely would serve as principal writer for *A Certain Young Man* (1928), also starring Ramon Novarro and Carmel Myers (Iras in the 1925 *Ben-Hur*) (Soares, 2010: 110).

³⁰ Sekely, B. (3 September 1924). Critique of Carey Wilson's continuity, 4. MGM Collection, USC.

³¹ See Sheehy (2003) for a comprehensive view of Duse's life and work.

³² Letter to Fred Niblo from Irving Thalberg (23 September 1924). Rudy Behlmer Papers, AMPAS.

³³ Scodel (2013) 316. Gabler (1988: 284-286) describes Jewish religiosity in Hollywood, and the founding of the Temple Israel in 1926 for members of Hollywood's Jewish community.

cinema, amidst contemporary political and social oppression of Jews in the United States.³⁴

In addition to Christ's featured appearances in the Nativity scene, at the well with Ben-Hur, and on the Via Dolorosa/at the Crucifixion derived from Wallace's novel, other scenes from Christ's life were included in drafts of the continuity, seemingly for the purpose of enhancing the atmosphere of religious devotion in prospective audiences. A list of 'Suggested Bible Sequences' generated by the creators of the intertitles, Katharine Hilliker and H.H. Caldwell, appears rather late in the production stage (6 October 1925). The scenes of 'Jesus and the Little Children', 'Gethsemane', 'The Woman Taken in Adultery', and 'The Lord's Supper' (only the latter two appear in the final version of the film) are described in detail, with camera directions included, and biblical quotations provided as intertitles. Most likely, these intertitles are not merely expository, for these visual scenarios would have likely been recognisable to Christian and non-Christian viewers. Instead, the intertitles arguably authenticate the action onscreen, providing a biblical authority for the visual portrayals, and encourage those Christians in the audience to cultivate a devotional relationship with the visual material (serving a function similar to that of biblical intertitles in other life of Christ films, notably Kalem's *From the Manger to the Cross*, 1912).

The plans for the portrayal of Christ's corporeality, and the conversations related to audiences' potential responses to this material, culminated in a conflict of creative vision between producer Abraham Erlanger and director of production Irving Thalberg just two weeks before the film was scheduled to premiere at the George M. Cohan Theatre on Broadway. On 14 December 1925, a list of 'Titles Suggested By Erlanger' indicates that Erlanger signed off on the version of the film that adhered to his (and Wallace's) preference that Christ be represented by a beam of light, and that the film end with the healing of the lepers.³⁵ Erlanger's version functioned to maintain a boundary of reverence for Christ, yet Irving Thalberg perceived this boundary as a hindrance to audiences' emotional engagement with the film.

On 15 December 1925, Thalberg (presumably upon receiving Erlanger's suggestions for changes to the continuity) sent a telegram to studio executive Nicholas

³⁴ Scodel (2013) 317.

³⁵ 'Titles suggested by Erlanger' (14 December, 1925). MGM Collection, USC. Erlanger's version bypasses the earlier drafts of Wilson's continuity, and picks up Mathis' ending from 1922.

Schenck,³⁶ beseeching him to allow the film to be screened with the scenes from the Crucifixion to which Erlanger had objected:

We realize that elimination of hand of Christ elimination of cross at crucifixion elimination of scene at foot of cross of men dicing...will be greatest loss we could possibly make in picture...The greatness of the great sacrifice of this greatest figure of history has no actual human meaning.... Substitution of the light for hand makes for Christ so supernatural a personality that no conviction is felt to [sic] Ben Hur's hope of Christ being temporal king to lead him. Scene to Calvary having Romans beat their whips on light loses any drama or fear or emotion that scene as now played carries.

Thalberg emphasises the crucial function of Christ's body in contemporary Christian devotional exercises, and mentions more generally that Christ's bodily experience generates 'human meaning' for audiences. His admonition that Christ should not be excessively supernatural is framed within a concern for the logical development of the narrative and Ben-Hur's motivations. This comment may also demonstrate Thalberg's awareness of the growing interest in Jesus as a *historical* figure in Christian communities.³⁷

Thalberg counters Erlanger's concern that audiences will be alienated by graphic, 'gruesome' displays of Christ's blood, with the observation that iconography involving the wounds, blood, and other physical portrayals of the suffering of Christ is a central aspect of Christian devotion in the United States. The film's visual references to Christ's suffering would thus likely arouse in audiences 'great religious sorrow'.³⁸ Thalberg also dismisses Erlanger's alleged claim that Christ's presence in the form of light would be well received on the basis that it found favour with religious audiences during the stageplay's twenty-one-year run.³⁹ According to Thalberg, a light in place of Christ would be ineffective even in the theatre in 1925, due to audiences' 'demand' for realism.⁴⁰ In the end, Thalberg's appeals to Schenck for reasons of religion and showmanship (including the insistence that in order to replace the figure of Christ with light, the production team would need to postpone the premiere of the film) won out over Erlanger's misgivings.

³⁶ Telegram to Nicholas M. Schenck from Irving Thalberg (15 December 1925). Rudy Behlmer Papers, AMPAS.

³⁷ See Flamini (1994: 67) for discussion of Thalberg's religious background, and his interest in filming a life of Christ as a 'historical figure'.

³⁸ Scodel (2013: 319-320) discusses this telegram and Thalberg's noted emphasis on the sacrifice rather than the Resurrection as a source of Christian piety.

³⁹ For Christian audience responses to the stageplay, see Miller (2008: 162-3).

⁴⁰ At this point in the telegram, Thalberg mentions as a precedent the recent success of MGM's *The Big Parade*. An anti-war feature about a soldier who experiences the horrors of the First World War and falls in love with a French girl, *The Big Parade* was MGM's most profitable film in its early history (Hay, 1994: 43).

A second major area of narrative renegotiation (and deliberation among the filmmakers) was the development of the female characters. This may have been related to the fact that contemporary filmgoers were mostly women.⁴¹ Female spectators (also consumers of merchandise and products associated with filmgoing) were encouraged by the industry to channel their consumer gaze through the ‘star’—a desire to emulate the female star, and a desire for sexual possession of the male star (heterosexuality was assumed in the 1920s). Within the previous decade fan magazines had emerged to indulge the desire of self-identified fan networks, to maintain an ongoing relationship with their preferred film star through a continuous process of film viewing and consumption of pre-/post-viewing discourse.

Richard Dyer defines the star image as ‘made up of screen roles and obviously stage-managed public appearances, and also of images of the manufacture of that “image” and of the real person who is the site or occasion of it.’⁴² Dyer posits four major phenomena of audience engagement with film stars, all of which carry implications for audiences’ affective engagement with a film: emotional affinity, or a general sense of ‘emotional attachment’ to the star in an onscreen role, or the offscreen persona of the star; self-identification, or the tendency for audience members to affectively identify with the character onscreen in the course of the viewing experience; imitation, or a spectator’s extra-cinematic emulation of the behaviour, aesthetic style, or other aspect of the star; and ‘projection’, a more extreme manifestation of self-identification that suggests a change in worldview or personality on the basis of that modelled by the star or his/her onscreen role.⁴³ Thus, from MGM’s perspective, the potential for casting in itself to offer significant invitations for emotional engagement would have been worthy of serious consideration.

There exists significant scholarly reflection on portrayals of masculinity in *Ben-Hur*, embodied in the physiological antithesis between Ramon Novarro as Ben-Hur and Francis X. Bushman as Messala.⁴⁴ The dynamics of femininity at play in the moral polarity of Esther and Iras earn markedly less attention in scholarship, yet the evolution of both characters in the continuity drafts for *Ben-Hur* (1925) demonstrates an interest on the part of screenwriter Carey Wilson in identifying Esther and Iras as characters with more fully developed motivations than Wallace’s and Young’s renderings, which work primarily to reinforce the moral polarisation between the two women.

⁴¹ Stamp (2012: 183); Studlar (1996: 263). According to Koszarski (1994: 30), *Moving Picture World* cites 83% of audience in the cinema as female in 1927, and the *New York Times* cites 60% in 1920.

⁴² Dyer (1998) 7.

⁴³ Ibid, 18.

⁴⁴ For instance, see Williams (2012: 116).

In his September 1924 continuity, Wilson wrote a new scene for Esther, in which, following the chariot race, she commandeers the chariot of a Roman youth and successfully warns Ben-Hur that Iras has sent soldiers to apprehend him as the attempted assassin of Gratus (Roman governor of Judaea), also in attendance at the arena. Wilson endows Esther with a crucial moment of heroism, reminiscent of that demonstrated by the female leads of serials popular in the 1910s, independent, strong-minded women who would save men from life-threatening circumstances.⁴⁵ Bela Sekely indicated this as one of six particularly remarkable scenes in the continuity. He explains from the point of view of the potential spectator, ‘This action of Esther is not contained in the original book, nor in the play...it enlarges the part of Esther, gives her character more strength and will enrich the picture with a highly impressive and exciting scene’.⁴⁶

In the same version of the continuity Wilson experimented with exposing the psychology of Iras to the spectator more than Wallace, Young, and Mathis had done previously. When Wilson introduces the love affair between Iras and Messala, Messala speaks to their ‘clandestine love’:⁴⁷ ‘That thy father’s hatred of Romans makes us meet secretly like this—does not lessen my great love for thee, Iras’. Messala and Iras become star-crossed lovers—Sheik Ilderim (Iras’ father in this version) cultivates a deep hatred of Romans, and Messala beseeches Iras to wear his colours at the chariot race out of her father’s sight. Wilson thus transforms the significance of racing colours given to Iras by William Young, colours which she uses in the stageplay to manipulate the emotions of both Ben-Hur and Messala.

In Wilson, Iras is ‘passionately in love’ with Messala, who is ‘devoted’ to her. She is still coquettish and teasing, he insistent—but there is a certain degree of emotional transparency provided in their scenes that invites the audience to cultivate a sympathy for Iras and Messala. Such sympathy from audiences endangers their capacity to appear as figures in strict alignment with the tradition for villainy in toga drama adapted for the cinema.⁴⁸ This strategy of character development may have run the risk

⁴⁵ See Mahar (2001) for a description of the ways in which powerful female characters in serials glorified the New Woman in the mid-1910s. See Singer (1996) for a more comprehensive history of serials.

⁴⁶ Sekely, B. (3 September 1924). Critique of Carey Wilson’s continuity, 8, USC. Elsewhere Sekely provides commentary on the film’s potential to engage audiences emotionally. For instance, he identifies himself with an imagined audience witnessing the arrest of Ben-Hur and his family: ‘we are overwhelmed with pity and sympathy, and anxiously follow the prisoners...’ (7).

⁴⁷ Wilson, C. (6 September 1924). *Ben-Hur* continuity, Scenes 362-363. MGM Collection, USC. This continuity is dated slightly later than Sekely’s review and thus may be an updated version from the copy Sekely read initially.

⁴⁸ Mayer (1994: 1-20). Mayer also discusses the polarisation of female figures in toga drama: the virtuous, domestic Christian, and the powerful, disruptive adventuresome, Egyptian/Roman (14-15).

of soliciting what Janet Staiger calls ‘perverse’ identification from female audiences.⁴⁹ Lobbying groups such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) were advocating for widespread promotion of Christian morality in the cinema, and were highly critical of Hollywood films whose romantic plots involved adultery or female leads behaving immorally in other ways.⁵⁰

Despite Wilson’s efforts to individualise the character motivations of Iras and Esther, the scenes mentioned above were cut from the final screen version of *Ben-Hur* (1925), which strongly adheres to Wallace’s original moral polarisation of Iras and Esther as adventuress and ingénue functioning primarily to pull Ben-Hur’s affections, and spiritual inclination toward Christianity, in one way or the other.⁵¹ Bruce Babington and Peter Evans have observed the function of Esther particularly in the 1925 and 1959 *Ben-Hur* films as an agent motivating Ben-Hur as the ‘warrior-patriarch’ toward a ‘return to matriarchy... Both *Ben-Hur* films culminate in *tableaux* where the hero is surrounded by the three women, mother, sister, and future wife’.⁵² Although the studio archive does not contain sufficient information to support a concrete explanation of why these scenes were cut, observations about the contemporary Hollywood film industry suggest some potential reasons. Firstly, the rescuer quality of Carey Wilson’s Esther, reminiscent of that of a serial heroine, may have seemed generically out of place. According to Singer, ‘from the perspective of industry history the serials can be seen as a resistance to the emergence of the feature film’.⁵³ The Egyptian adventuress, on the other hand, did have a recognisable screen equivalent in historical feature films: the ‘vamp’. J. Gordon Edwards’ 1917 film *Cleopatra* starred Theda Bara in the title role, embodying the Egyptian queen as a ‘vamp’, a cinematic model of villainous seduction Bara originally popularised with her starring role in *A Fool There Was* (1915).⁵⁴ Carmel Myers, who plays Iras in *Ben-Hur*, was known for her ‘vamping’, and from an audience perspective she would be expected to assume the recognisable character of an Egyptian seductress in historical melodramas that were generically appropriate to *Ben-Hur*.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Staiger (2000) 2.

⁵⁰ Parker (2006) 86.

⁵¹ Esther’s scene of heroism was presumably filmed, as it appears in the October 1925 chariot race continuity (Wilson, C. (9 October 1925). ‘Circus Continuity’ Scenes 149-50. MGM Collection, USC.)

⁵² Babington and Evans (1993) 196.

⁵³ Singer (1996) 163.

⁵⁴ Daugherty (2013) 189. For further discussion of Theda Bara’s influence on the connection between Orientalist costume and questionable morality, see Finamore (2013: 54-5).

⁵⁵ See Sections 3 and 4 of this chapter for discussion of the dynamics of the onscreen polarity of Iras and Esther, and the ways in which female audiences were invited to sustain their engagement with these models of femininity in the post-viewing context.

This documentation of the production decisions provides preliminary understanding of the ways in which invitations for audiences' emotional engagement were of great concern in the production process. Yet, as has been observed, not all of these intended affective solicitations made it onto the screen. An examination of the film text and its range of explicit and subtle strategies for emotional engagement will offer an interesting glimpse of the film's communication of Wallace's novel for a contemporary audience, and its sophisticated interweaving of distinct patterns of emotional response sought from audiences throughout the narrative.

4.3. PATTERNS OF EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT IN *BEN-HUR* (1925)

Theories of emotional engagement in film

Some scholars who have discussed the Niblo film record their impressions of its emotional content. Kevin Brownlow reveals his distaste for Francis X. Bushman's performance as Messala: 'Francis X. Bushman has the physique of a magnificent Messala, but he conveys menace in a roaring, melodramatic style which is now hard to accept.'⁵⁶ Jon Solomon evaluates, 'Emotion is conveyed perfectly by Novarro and Bushman' in the scene of their falling-out. He goes on to note, 'Vivid emotion of a different sort can be seen in the galley scene, when one desperate slave begins to bite his chains.'⁵⁷ Derek Elley's appraisal is more critical: 'Ramon Novarro is a weak, unconvincing Ben-Hur and Francis X. Bushman a posturing, histrionic Messala.'⁵⁸ These comments concern solicitations for audiences' emotional engagement made through acting style, only one of the means by which film during this period invites the affective responses of its audiences. This section will interrogate the complex relationship between various modes of stimuli and the predominant patterns of emotional experience they work together to represent and to evoke from spectators.

Within recent film theories of emotional engagement, two major avenues of observation emerge concerning Hollywood narrative film's representations of emotions onscreen, and their ability to establish an affective relationship between audiences and film texts. The first of these trends of scholarly observation, or what I term the 'protagonist-driven' approach, relates to the aforementioned commentary on acting performances. The 'immersive' approach, on the other hand, is characterised by the

⁵⁶ Brownlow (1968) 414.

⁵⁷ Solomon (2001) 205.

⁵⁸ Elley (1984) 131.

building of a multi-sensory emotional environment into which the spectator is immersed. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories; in fact, they complement each other, in that protagonist-driven forms of emotional engagement (costume, acting style, including facial expression and gesture, dialogue, expository intertitles, plot structure) are affirmed, and sometimes subverted, by the immersive forms (music, lighting, camera angles, colour, religious iconography) in the construction of a complex, heavily nuanced hermeneutic tapestry of invitations for audiences' emotional engagement on various levels of affect and cognition.

Carl Plantinga, who discusses both approaches, seems to prioritise the protagonist-driven approach when he characterises Hollywood films as 'a particularly emotional cinema', in their primary ability to be 'robustly sympathetic', encouraging audiences to experience sympathy with a clearly identified protagonist.⁵⁹ In the case of *Ben-Hur* (1925), this is certainly a prevalent feature, in line with the tradition of early 'toga films' adapted from nineteenth-century 'toga dramas' that encourage audiences' personal identification with the protagonist (usually a Jew, Christian, or proto-Christian) against the principal Roman antagonist.⁶⁰ Within this 'protagonist-driven' paradigm of emotional engagement, Plantinga promotes a 'cognitive-perceptual' theory for understanding ways in which emotions are both represented onscreen and evoked in spectators. This theory combines the idea that explicit expressions of emotions (usually via the dialogue and gesture of the principal characters) enhance the spectator's cognitive reading of the narrative with a concern for more subtle modes (such as music, landscape, or lighting) in which film can express emotion and elicit emotional responses from audiences through the establishment of a general affective atmosphere.

Plantinga's concept of the protagonist-driven solicitations of audiences' emotional response echoes the idea prominent in the work of Noël Carroll and Ed Tan⁶¹ of emotions working as 'concern-based construals'. This paradigm operates according to an understanding of a 'functional theory of emotions',⁶² which entails that emotions generally motivate us to interpret situations in terms of their potential to affect positively or negatively our personal concerns. Carroll and Tan both claim the ability for film to invite, and even succeed in establishing, the spectator's affective alignment with a protagonist whose concerns have been identified (such as Judah Ben-Hur, and his concern for reuniting with his family). The spectator then experiences emotional

⁵⁹ Plantinga (2009) 7.

⁶⁰ Mayer (1994) 1-20.

⁶¹ Carroll (1999: 31) and Tan (1996: 43-46).

⁶² Tan (1996) 43.

responses to the narrative's introduction of either threats or benefits to the concerns of the central protagonist, through the alignment of the spectator's own concerns with those of the protagonist.⁶³

Film theorist Murray Smith's version of the protagonist-driven approach proposes that narrative films invite engagement with characters on three distinct levels that make up a 'structure of sympathy'. The three elements, in brief, are: recognition (the illustration of a character 'analogous to people in the real world who can hold conflicting beliefs or emotions, and is capable of development'); alignment ('access to the viewpoint, or lens, of a character'); and allegiance (the moral evaluation of characters, followed by the ranking of these characters according to a moral 'system of preference').⁶⁴ The second element here, 'alignment', resembles the idea of emotions in audiences manifesting in response to 'concern-based construals' according to what is happening to the benefit or detriment of the protagonist's concerns. The third element requires the spectator's agency in constructing a moral hierarchy of characters on the basis of their adherence to the moral value systems of the broader cultural network to which the audience belongs.

One potential problem with this valuation of character engagement as synonymous with the emotional engagement of audiences is that it can easily be applied to other art forms, especially literature and theatre, and does not address the special capacities for *film* to stimulate emotional engagement. The 'protagonist-driven' approach must be supplemented by acknowledgement of film's, and (in the interest of this chapter) *silent film*'s, capacity to function as a special medium for engaging the emotions of audiences. It is here that the 'immersive' strategies of cinema come into play to supplement, or supplant, the influence of the elements related to the protagonist in order to communicate emotions and invite emotional responses from spectators. In other words, the 'medium specific' language of cinema must be acknowledged.⁶⁵

Plantinga demonstrates awareness of the problem identified above, and argues against theories that align the spectator's reaction solely with the sympathetic protagonist.⁶⁶ He provides the supplemental consideration of film's ability to induce *synesthetic affect*, a multi-sensory affective experience communicated in film through

⁶³ See Plantinga (2009: 150-154) for a classification of protagonist structures (including numbers of protagonists and relationships between protagonist(s) and antagonist), protagonist types, and patterns of spectator alignment with character concerns prevalent in Hollywood films. No examples from silent film appear here.

⁶⁴ Smith (1995) 75.

⁶⁵ Currie (1995) 117. For theoretical a foundation for ideas of cinematic language, see Metz (1974).

⁶⁶ Plantinga (2009) 10.

various modes of information, including music, lighting, camera angles, and other cinematic narrative techniques that colour and enhance the spectator's sensory experience of the action onscreen, and supplement the emotions expressed by the characters. This strategy aims to make a general emotional impression on the spectator, which complements, but does not precisely parallel, the emotional landscape of the film, rendering the 'synesthetic affect' 'an experience in which the viewer cannot be said to share the same emotions as the characters, but nonetheless experiences powerful elements of the affective experience'.⁶⁷ Kristin Thompson advocates a similar type of analysis of 'immersive' elements specific to *silent* film. Thompson's model acknowledges the potential for 'expressivity' in the cinematic language of silent film (strategies of camerawork, editing, and intertitles), which 'in many cases...deepen[s] the viewer's emotional involvement in the action'.⁶⁸

Sound effects and music are a major consideration for Plantinga as he builds his discussion toward applications of synesthetic affect in film,⁶⁹ yet none of his examples come from silent cinema. Ostensibly this may seem problematic when it comes to applying his model of analysing emotions onscreen to *Ben-Hur* (1925). In sound film today, sound features, whether in the form of a musical score, sound effects, or speech, singing, and other vocalisations, are either overlaid onto film or recorded in time with the image onscreen. The sound for a given film is usually standardised, and does not vary among separate screenings. Although the 1925 *Ben-Hur* did have a standard score for musical accompaniment, arranged by William Axt and David Mendoza,⁷⁰ the performance of this score would differ depending upon the resources of each exhibition venue. The sound features of *Ben-Hur* (1925) did not include speech, and thus spectators could not receive emotional information from vocal inflection. Instead, the inflection had to be read through the dialogue transmitted in the intertitles, which employed punctuation and italics to communicate the emotional tone of speech.

Still, it is worth careful acknowledgement of the significant role music was thought to contribute to the emotional engagement of audiences on both 'immersive' and 'protagonist-driven' levels in the mid-1920s. From the 1910s onward there was a conscious effort among musical directors at exhibition venues to use music to engage audiences emotionally with the content of a narrative feature film. Music cue sheets

⁶⁷ Ibid, 166.

⁶⁸ Thompson (2004) 254.

⁶⁹ Plantinga (2009) 130-6.

⁷⁰ This score is preserved in the Library of Congress. The film was sometimes accompanied by sound effects, depending on the capability of the individual cinema (Mendoza, reported in Slide, 2005: 72).

indicated points throughout the film that required a musical theme (usually derived from pre-existing compositions) communicating the emotional environment of the scene.⁷¹

In the 1920s musical accompaniment developed significantly to complement the dominance of the narrative feature film exhibited in a purpose-built cinema.⁷² Emotional themes became associated with a character, in addition to the action or the plot. Particularly through the use of *leitmotifs* in the style of Wagner's operas, the music could effectively introduce a character's emotions to the awareness of the audience, whether that character is present or absent onscreen, through the provision of a musical theme associated with that character from his or her first appearance in the film.⁷³ This is an important consideration in a pamphlet published by the Boston Music Company, Edith Lang and George West's 'Musical Accompaniment of Moving Pictures' (1920). In their discussion of the player's communication of emotions through music, the authors specify that the musician should be able to identify the 'fundamental emotions' of 'love and hatred, hope and despair, harrowing moments of tension and episodes of comic relief' as well as their 'related affections' onscreen.⁷⁴ The primary skill musicians are encouraged to adopt in order to adequately register emotion onscreen is the reading of facial expression: 'Since the actor, deprived of speech, must emphasize his emotions by facial play, the twinkle in his eye, a furrow of his brow, a look, or a smile are the only manifestations of his thought'.⁷⁵

Nowhere in the pamphlet is there mention of gesture, costume, intertitles, or other sources of information for the musician concerning the emotional state of the characters in a given scene. Intertitles had provided dialogue in narrative feature film in the United States since Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), and thus by 1920 had been well established as a significant component in the development of the plot as well as in the portrayal of individual characters.⁷⁶ Yet Lang and West's pamphlet claims that the actors are 'deprived of speech', despite the frequent occurrence of dialogue in titles. They privilege a singular aspect of nonverbal acting as a reliable form of emotional expression: facial expression. The close-up was thus a highly valuable tool for filmmakers to communicate emotions onscreen, through the faces of characters. There

⁷¹ Anderson (1988: xxxi); Altman (2004: 368).

⁷² Altman (2004) 368-71.

⁷³ Cohen (2001) 258.

⁷⁴ Lang and West (1920) 4. The description of the fundamental emotions along with the suggestion that these can be recognised in facial expressions resembles Paul Ekman's (1992) classification of six basic emotions (enjoyment, anger, fear, sadness, disgust, and surprise), which his research suggests is universally identifiable through facial expression.⁷⁴

⁷⁵ Lang and West (1920) 4-5.

⁷⁶ Shepherd (2013a) 232.

was also ample potential for the filmmaker, the audience, and the musician(s) to derive affective meaning from the relationship between the stimuli of the visual (close-up shot) and aural (musical accompaniment).⁷⁷

Framework for analysis

Ideally, in order to understand the relationship of *Ben-Hur* (1925) to the cultural phenomenon of significant and lasting collective interpretations of the novel that preceded the film's emergence, a framework for analysis of emotions in the film will allow for multiple sources of representation of emotions onscreen, and will indicate opportunities for the audience to form interpretations of this film's interaction with the cultural context of its emergence.⁷⁸ This methodology will also allow the exploration of intertextual relationships between this film and the previous narrative incarnations of *Ben-Hur* (novel and stageplay), as well as works from other media traditions that may have influenced the film text.

To engage optimally with these levels of understanding of the interplay between text, audience, and reception context, the film analysis will identify major *patterns* of emotional engagement *Ben-Hur* (1925) offers to its spectators, and will examine the varied uses of cinematic language, via both protagonist-driven and immersive modes of emotional engagement, to create these patterns that are interwoven throughout the narrative in conversation with the narrative drive of Wallace's novel. These patterns fall under four main thematic emotional points of focus, each of which emerges as the dominant mode of emotional engagement in various sequences throughout the film, and otherwise acts as a supporting emotional engagement mechanism.

These four identifiable points of emotional focus are namely *atmospheric*, *melodramatic*, *spectacular*, and *religious*. An analysis featuring these patterns of emotional focus has the benefit of identifying the film's periodic calls for audiences' affective involvement with the narrative, and even anticipating collective interpretations that may have emerged following screenings. This method is also designed to elucidate the mutability of the landscape of invitations for emotional engagement *Ben-Hur* provides, a landscape characterised by shifting points of emotional focus that harmonise in the course of the linear narrative development. *Ben-Hur*'s diversification of points of emotional interest, from the construction of an atmosphere with a particular emotional

⁷⁷ The close-up had been in use for capturing facial expressions since 1912 (Bowser, 1994: 96).

⁷⁸ Similar to Bordwell's (1985: 16-17) concern for understanding the 'implicit' or 'symptomatic' structures of meaning through which a film invokes and comments on the receiving culture's social, political, or religious value systems, and which can become more consequential than the linear plot structure in their significance to historical spectators.

charge, to the concern for Ben-Hur as sympathetic protagonist, to the invitation to be spiritually healed by Christ, facilitates a recognition of this film's potential to create a variety of impressions on its audiences.

For clarity of presentation, and for the benefit of examining the potential consequences of a major departure in emotional focus from Wallace's narrative in the final third of the film, the analysis of selected sequences featuring the points of emotional focus listed above will be presented in chronological order. These four patterns of emotional engagement can be identified through characteristic elements of the composition of sequences in which they are dominant. These categories are specifically designed for the analysis of the dynamics of emotions and emotional invitations in *Ben-Hur* (1925), and may or may not be applicable to other films in the historical/biblical epic genre in this period.

1. A sequence with a mainly *atmospheric* focus features a mixture of long and medium shots; close-ups are rare. Intertitles are almost completely expository, with limited dialogue. These sequences establish a space, and the movement of people within the space; costume, set design, and distribution of crowds are the primary focus. Takes are short, edited together into a montage, creating a hyper-realistic viewing experience for the omniscient and omnipresent spectator. There is a tension between 'othered' and relatable inhabitants of these scenes, in sympathy with the ethnographic hierarchy of Romans, Jews, and Christians Wallace introduces in his novel to motivate the sympathetic orientation of his reader toward the 'highest' cultural and moral experience of the Christian converts in his narrative.⁷⁹ The eye of the spectator is encouraged to wander and explore the frame, and the spectator is invited to experience sympathy with the more 'relatable' characters in this environment, although these figures are not necessarily essential to the melodramatic or religious plotlines.

2. The *melodramatic* focus for a sequence is characterised by the appearance of the principal protagonists (Judah Ben-Hur, Esther, Simonides, the Sheik), and/or the antagonists (Messala and Iras). There tends to be a chronological procession of shots from medium to close-up, as the interaction between the characters gradually becomes more emotionally charged. Long shots are rare, and the characters tend to stand close

⁷⁹ Morsberger and Morsberger (1980) 451.

together, with their bodies (or faces, in the case of medium close-up shots)⁸⁰ just in the frame so that the space has a close, at times almost claustrophobic, feeling. A curtain or an iris medium close-up often provides the backdrop for scenes with heightened emotional impact. Dialogue often revolves around issues of characters' personal identity. Intertitles are almost exclusively used for dialogue. Long takes enhance the realistic quality of the scene, as if the spectator occupies the same space as the characters onscreen.⁸¹ The aesthetic features of the sequence (costumes, *mise-en-scène*, etc.) are designed to intensify the point of conflict within these confrontations, and to marshal the viewer's sympathy for the identified protagonist(s) and antipathy for the antagonist(s).

3. Although there are only two readily identifiable sequences with a primary emotional point of focus on *spectacle*, the naval battle and the chariot race, it is important to address their strategies of emotional engagement, since these sequences differ markedly from the other categories in *how* they are filmed. Camera angles shift rapidly, and long shots, medium shots, and close-ups are edited together in rapid succession. At first, the main characters and individual extras are identified in acute situations of peril haphazardly, so that the spectators are instructed to attach and detach their sympathies repeatedly. Eventually, the principal characters become the featured players in these sequences, through the use of close-ups, and longer takes. The multi-dimensional sight gained from the shifting camera angles immerses the spectator in an intense, affective experience of thrill that heightens the stakes of the melodramatic scenario (through the camera's attention to the protagonists/antagonists within the spectacle sequence). Few intertitles are incorporated, and these alternate between exposition and dialogue (similar to the intertitles in atmospheric sequences).

4. The sequences with a dominant *religious* point of emotional focus predictably feature a biblical event (such as the sighting of the Christmas star) or person (Mary or Christ, frequently corporeally represented by a hand). There is often a sustained focus on the changing facial expression of the individual (whether protagonist or 'relatable' extra) who has encountered a biblical event or person. Intertitles are often either expository, or direct quotations from the Bible, represented on a backdrop that carries the appearance

⁸⁰ Niblo demonstrates consistent use of the medium close-up (head and shoulders) to show emotional expression of characters, with whom he invites the audience to sympathise. Thompson (1988: 312) explains that by the mid-1920s the medium close-up was frequently used in classical Hollywood cinema for 'details, reactions, or intense emotions...isolat[ing] the single figure from the setting...'.
⁸¹ Currie (1995) 107-8.

of a scroll, with the name of the gospel in Roman capitals at the top.⁸² Intertitles for dialogue are rare. Acting gestures are slow-moving, and the camera lingers on the reverent gaze of characters who encounter a holy event or figure. The audience is likewise invited to regard reverently the face of Mary, captured in close-up, or the face of Christ. Although, due to the absence of Christ's face onscreen, this latter encounter is mediated by the visible hand of Christ and the facial expressions of characters in the film who look upon the face of Christ, just out of frame. Finally, these sequences work within the cinematic tradition of emulating other sources of religious iconography, particularly Renaissance painting (such as Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*).

These categories of emotional focus are not mutually exclusive; they engage in a dynamic relationship throughout the course of the film that allows the spectator to contextualise the development of the religious narrative within the course of the melodramatic narrative. Also, this relationship allows for the underscoring of emotional investment in one sequence through the supplementary incorporation of another. For example, audiences can enjoy the thrill of the spectacle sequence, such as the naval battle, without forgetting their concern for the sympathetic protagonist within it. As the camera progresses from a barrage of long and close action shots of ships ablaze, and unidentified Romans and pirates battling, to longer, more sustained takes of Ben-Hur's role within the conflict, the melodramatic appeal anchors the audiences' investment in a positive outcome for the Roman navy.

Certain similarities do emerge between these categories of sequence. The few hand-coloured scenes in the film occur in all categories, except (rather surprisingly) spectacle. In all sequences Niblo sustains a crucial tension between film and the various art forms on which the medium draws (the novel, melodramatic theatre, painting). He thus simultaneously aligns filmmaking with other traditional 'high art' forms, and suggests that film is a medium which can enhance the audience's emotional experience of the artistic material, by providing varied opportunities for emotional engagement on different levels of intimacy with characters and the aesthetic environment more generally. For convenience, in the course of analysis director Fred Niblo will be identified as the central authorial influence, in line with a frequently employed

⁸² Scodel (2013: 321) observes that behind the title on the backdrop resembling a papyrus roll there appears illegible writing resembling Hebrew, Aramaic, or possibly Greek.

‘individual author’ approach in film analysis described by Richard Dyer as the scholarly attribution of everything in the film text to the director.⁸³

Patterns of emotional focus in Ben-Hur (1925)

The opening sequence is dominated by an atmospheric emotional focus. The visual sequence is preceded by two expository intertitles:

Pagan Rome was at the zenith of her power. The tread of her iron legion shook the world; and from every land rose the cries of captive peoples—praying for a deliverer / In Judea the glory that was Israel’s lay scattered in the dust—and Jerusalem the Golden, conquered and oppressed, wept in the shadow of her walls.

The poignant language of the opening titles, indicating the suffering of a people as the cost of the triumph of conquerors, prepares the audience, whether or not previously familiar with the story, for a ‘micro-history’, which emphasises the personal struggles of individuals who are at the effect of political, social, economic, and religious issues in their historical circumstances.⁸⁴ Contrary to Harvard psychologist Hugo Münsterberg’s contemporary argument that ‘leaders’ (titles) in narrative feature film detract from the emotional impact of the visual material on audiences,⁸⁵ the placement of these opening titles *before* the presentation of visual information influences the audience’s perception of images to come. The anguished anticipation of a ‘deliverer’ from political oppression contrasts powerfully with the final title of the film, Judah Ben-Hur’s line, ‘He is not dead, for he will live forever in the hearts of men’, in which the saviour has been characterised as unmistakably *spiritual*.

The viewer is permitted a brief glimpse of a wide shot of the city of Jerusalem before two more intertitles establish the time (24 December—another indication of the Christian significance embedded in the historical setting), the place (Joppa Gate), and the action (people from all over the Roman world—‘Syrians, Greeks, Jews, Egyptians’—are travelling homeward to be taxed, by Roman decree). The camera captures a wide shot of an immense crowd in the foreground moving towards the Joppa Gate in the background. The row of spears lining the bottom of the stone gate (Fig. 4.1) indicates the Roman control of what would normally be an open space for free movement. Two-thirds of the frame is crowded with people amassed tightly together, bound by the militaristic whim of their oppressors.

⁸³ Dyer (1998) 151.

⁸⁴ Rosenstone (2012) 53-4.

⁸⁵ Münsterberg (1916) 78-9.



Fig. 4.1: Roman soldiers at Joppa Gate in background (MGM, *Ben-Hur*, 1925)

The montage of shots progresses from wide to overhead to medium, creating the impression of the omniscient spectator. Intertitles for dialogue emerge, giving the impression that the audience is physically near enough to individuals in the crowd to hear what they are saying. The opening expository intertitles initially instruct the viewer to assume the role of a curious ethnographic observer, ready to see distinctions between the Egyptians and Syrians, for example, in line with Wallace's literary description of the various styles of dress a visitor to ancient Jerusalem may glimpse. However, in Niblo's film there is a lack of distinguishing features among the costumes of the non-Romans, almost all of whom are wearing tunics, cloaks, and turbans, in contrast to the Romans in their armour. This creates for the spectator a clear opposition between Roman and non-Roman.⁸⁶

The Romans are non-verbal, and communicate through gestures, forcing people through the Joppa Gate in one direction or another, or causing conflict for the non-Roman populus. The non-Romans engage in conversations that have a sort of timelessness about them, enhancing the personal relatability of the speakers from the audience's perspective. For instance, the camera captures a woman having her makeup done, then cuts to a shot of two turbaned men, one of whom comments to his neighbour, 'Will women ever cease to paint their faces?' The two men shake their heads and laugh, signalling to mid-1920s viewers that they can, as Jon Solomon mentions with respect to filmmakers' habitual characterisation of people in an ancient world setting, 'see that the

⁸⁶ Scodel (2013: 328) notes a similar lack of interest in visual distinction between ethnicities, in favour of an emphasis on Roman versus non-Roman and the association with military and (oppressed) civilian identity.

ancient world was inhabited with people who acted very much like people in our own world'.⁸⁷

Within this opening atmospheric sequence emerges the initial religious point of emotional focus, with the introduction of Mary and Joseph into the crowd beneath Joppa Gate. Niblo employs a new set of techniques to induce the solemn, almost reverential engagement of audiences with religious material onscreen. The placement of the audience's initial encounter with Mary after an immersion into an environment of political oppression suggests the misalignment between the 'historical' belief in the messiah as a martial or political force, and Christ's true status as a divine source of healing, and initiation to spiritual salvation. As Ruth Scodel observes, the Christian message in this film is simply one of peace, love, and non-violence, meant to diminish any potential denominational contentions.⁸⁸ In contrast to the quick succession of shots from various distances in the prior atmospheric sequence, the camera shifts the focus to a religious sequence through sustained takes of the characters from either close-up or medium shots. The emphasis here is on the *facial expression* of the person encountering Mary. Mary, in medium shot, looks down to see a woman near her attempting to fan a small child. Mary reaches down slowly and wipes the child's brow with her hand. The woman glares at her in suspicion. Then, the camera cuts to a medium close-up of Mary's face, looking down (as if toward the woman) (Fig. 4.2). The camera matches this with a medium close-up of the woman gazing off left (toward Mary), her expression changing from suspicion to serenity (Fig. 4.3).

Niblo invites his audience to experience the spiritually transformative quality of Mary's presence, much like Wallace does in his detailed physical description of Mary that culminates in his observation of her 'air of purity which only the soul can impart' (*Ben-Hur*, 44). Howard Miller's remark in the context of the Nativity in the film (produced in Technicolor) is also relevant to the sequence above: '[Mary's] face and smile (in conspicuous contrast to the elusive Jesus) here seem to possess extraordinary powers over others. As in the novel, Mary appears to have an extraordinary connection to God.'⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Solomon (2001) 3.

⁸⁸ Scodel (2013) 329. See also Miller (2008: 164-5) for a catalogue of specific instances in which denominational distinctions are avoided.

⁸⁹ Miller (2008) 164.



Fig. 4.2: Mary in medium close-up (MGM, *Ben-Hur*, 1925)



Fig. 4.3: Woman encountering Mary (MGM, *Ben-Hur*, 1925)

The woman encountering Mary in this sequence serves as an embedded spectator, a model for the nature of the audience's solicited engagement with Mary. The woman's costume, unlike Mary's costume or the dress of female extras in the previous atmospheric sequence, covers her neck, forehead, and the sides of her face, resembling a nun's wimple. This may appear at first to be an ironic allusion, or a clumsy anachronism, given that in the context of the film Christ has not been born yet, and the early church certainly has not yet emerged. However, the potential interpretations of this aesthetic detail are important to consider, in light of the waning influence of Christian evangelism in the film industry during the late silent era, and the relationship between the church and the cinema to which contemporary audiences would have been well accustomed. As Terry Lindvall explains, 'Informing the early reception of silent movies in America was the cultural hegemony of Protestants and, by the end of the era, the emerging influence of Roman Catholics...'.⁹⁰ However, beginning in the early 1920s, the Christian hold on Hollywood production began to slacken, and various Christian groups were coming out against what they perceived to be a declining moral code in films made during that time.⁹¹ Thus, the seeming appearance of a representative of the church in conjunction with the first appearance of religious material onscreen may have served as a message that this was a film that communities of Christian critics should support.⁹²

Within this sequence Niblo embeds an image that is picked up in the melodramatic plotline, encouraging audiences to anticipate the merging of the two story

⁹⁰ Lindvall (2009) 26.

⁹¹ Ibid, 27.

⁹² Director of production Irving Thalberg was aware of the pressure on Hollywood from powerful Christian groups, and would collaborate with other producers on the generation of the guidelines for moral filmmaking known more commonly as the 'Don'ts and Be Carefuls', released in 1927 (Vieira, 2010: 73).

arcs. At the end of the sequence, when the camera captures Mary and Joseph in medium shot walking away from the woman, a flock of doves flies across the frame, following Mary. When, following the Nativity sequence, the film arrives at the melodramatic plotline, Niblo introduces the character of Esther, the young Ben-Hur's love interest, riding a donkey out of Jerusalem. She acquires a dove, an action which catches Ben-Hur's eye. Esther is thus visually associated with Mary, and emerges in the film (as she does in Wallace's novel) as a vital feminine agent in Ben-Hur's conversion to Christianity.

The initial meeting of Ben-Hur and Esther is the first instance in which the melodramatic emotional focus becomes particularly dominant. There is also a compelling departure from Wallace—the initial characterisation of Ben-Hur as a *lover*.⁹³ When Esther is introduced, she displays tenderness as she is captured in medium close-up gently cradling her new dove. The camera cuts to a parallel shot of Ben-Hur, who stands transfixed by the sight of Esther. Suddenly, the dove escapes, and the camera, from the point of view of Esther, registers Ben-Hur's amusing attempts to catch it. Having retrieved the dove, he carries it over to Esther.

The consequent shots evidence Niblo's techniques for encouraging the audience to comprehend and align with the personal concerns of the melodramatic protagonists. Esther's gestures signify her conflicted emotional state of desire for Ben-Hur's company and concern with maintaining her sexual purity. First (Fig. 4.4), Esther makes eye contact with Ben-Hur, but pulls her veil in toward her neck, her arms covering her chest in a gesture of modesty and vulnerability. After he moves toward her (Fig. 4.5), they hold the dove together, smiling, with both of their gazes trained on the bird. Esther is clearly comforted, knowing that she and Ben-Hur can focus together on cultivating a shared sense of purity between them; she no longer feels the need to veil herself. The camera maintains a static, medium shot of the couple, which invites the audience's emotional immediacy with the characters, and takes the attention away from the editorial role of the camera. The directed lighting makes the wall behind the figures fade into the darkness, illuminating their moment of closeness.

Finally the camera subtly shifts to a medium close-up view (Fig. 4.6), which skilfully captures the high point of the intimacy between Esther and Ben-Hur. Esther kisses the dove, transposing her affection for Ben-Hur onto it, communicating her

⁹³ While Esther is Ben-Hur's primary romantic interest, Iras emerges as a pawn of Messala who attempts to seduce Ben-Hur in order to discover his identity. However, as Jon Solomon has observed (2001: 204), there is no meaningful love triangle between Judah, Iras, and Messala as there is in Wallace's novel, which mitigates the threat of temptation that Ben-Hur must escape onscreen.

appreciation of their pure, even divinely-sanctioned, love for one another. In this sequence, Esther applies somewhat of a guard against potential male intrusions into her sphere of modesty and family loyalty (she must leave Ben-Hur shortly after they meet in order to accompany her father to Antioch). For female spectators Esther provides a model of feminine domesticity, a lingering image of Victorian morality characterised by ‘sexual purity, passivity, emotional superiority,...moral guardianship’⁹⁴ that is consistent with Wallace’s illustration of her. Yet in mid-1920s popular culture this model of femininity struggled to compete with the image of the New Woman, the champion of the independent female consumer, career-minded woman, and even the divorcee.⁹⁵ The tension between Esther and Iras later in the film invokes this challenging dynamic between contemporary female archetypes.



Fig. 4.4: Ben-Hur and Esther 1 (MGM, *Ben-Hur*, 1925)



Fig. 4.5: Ben-Hur and Esther 2 (MGM, *Ben-Hur*, 1925)



Fig. 4.6: Ben-Hur and Esther 3 (MGM, *Ben-Hur*, 1925)

In this scene with Esther, Ben-Hur is a gentle youth, rather awkwardly inexperienced in amorous pursuits. Mexican actor Ramon Novarro is immediately established in the film

⁹⁴ Hansen (1991a) 120.

⁹⁵ See Mahar (2001) for a description of the ways in which Hollywood films and the placement of female professionals within the Hollywood film industry constitute American cultural responses to the New Woman from the mid-1910s through the 1920s.

as clothed in an aura of innocence and safety through his sensitivity to and respect for female sexual purity. This is arguably a deliberate ploy to detach the onscreen ‘foreigner’ from the contemporary ‘ethnic lover’, typified by Rudolph Valentino’s model of the dangerous, seductive, and swarthy ethnic ‘other’.⁹⁶ Novarro’s star image was well crafted in the mid-1920s as ‘an all-American boy trapped in a Mexican body’, a foreigner whose reported devotion to his family and Catholic faith rendered him ‘American’ in spirit.⁹⁷

Novarro’s gentleness as Ben-Hur can be contrasted with Francis X. Bushman’s brashness as an older and sexually experienced Messala, evidenced by his confident advances on the coquettish Egyptian Iras further on in the film.⁹⁸ This introduction of Novarro is a marked departure from Wallace, who introduces his protagonist, initially nameless, as ‘the Jew’ in the context of a religious and political debate with Messala (*Ben-Hur*, 79-82). Although Niblo’s Ben-Hur in his opening encounter with Esther is clearly wearing a kippah, the religious and political implications of his Jewishness do not emerge initially as his chief characteristic.

The political implications of Ben-Hur’s Jewish identity are raised with the introduction of Messala’s character, and this culminates in the friends’ falling out, in the ‘domestic sphere’, the sitting room of the lavish palace of Hur.⁹⁹ In this scene, audiences receive a glimpse of Niblo’s interest in presenting a *mise-en-scène* that aims to showcase fashion and home décor, a technique other directors, particularly Cecil B. DeMille, had been incorporating into their films since the late 1910s,¹⁰⁰ in alignment with the developing relationship between material consumerism and the cinema. This relationship was often marketed to the growing female presence at the cinema—the New Woman with the disposable income.

After the visualisation of this opulent, domestic *mise-en-scène*, the argument between Ben-Hur and Messala occurs in an area that is tucked away from the open, more impressive spaces of the palace. The confrontation, a high point of emotional solicitation for sympathy with the melodramatic protagonist, occurs before a relatively unadorned backdrop of a plain, dark curtain, with a couch in front of it (Fig. 4.7). As in

⁹⁶ Studlar (2003: 299-301); Chávez (2011: 523-4).

⁹⁷ Soares (2010) 109.

⁹⁸ See Williams (115-16, 134) for further discussion of masculinity in Novarro and Bushman’s portrayals of the melodramatic pair.

⁹⁹ See Section 2 of this chapter for the borrowing of the ‘domestic paradigm’ from stage tradition.

¹⁰⁰ Higashi (2004: 305-307) argues that cinema’s meticulous display of such aesthetics invited upper-middle-class audiences particularly to experiment with displays of opulence in their own homes. Yet later in the film, through the example of Iras’ inclinations toward luxury and extravagance, Niblo employs desirable aesthetics to suggest a loss of virtue and family values resulting from *excessive* consumerism.

the interaction between Esther and Ben-Hur, the camera's authorial role is rather subdued, as it maintains a medium shot of the two men in this rather simplistic mise-en-scène through almost the entire argument. With a simple collection of props, close framing, and the denial of deep staging,¹⁰¹ the heated confrontation is almost forced upon the spectator. The oppositional relationship between the two men is embodied in their costume, representative of their militaristic and civilian identities, respectively. Messala's armour glints in the light cast upon it, his feathered helm increasing his height, emblematic of his feelings of superiority to Ben-Hur,¹⁰² whose Jewishness, represented by his kippah, appears in pronounced contrast.



Fig. 4.7: Messala's and Ben-Hur's falling out (MGM, *Ben-Hur*, 1925)

The static camera fixes the audience's attention on the scene of 'pure' melodrama, with the intertitles as the only obvious source of cinematic artifice. This technique may also signal Niblo's suggestion of film's emulation of the conventions of theatre, particularly given that the Klaw and Erlanger production likewise set the argument between Ben-Hur and Messala in the Hur home. Niblo introduces a tension between the opportunity of film and the visual restrictions of theatre,¹⁰³ including: the audience's limitation to only one view of the stage; the inability for all theatregoers to register with the same visual clarity the facial expressions of the actors; and the relatively limited amount of space for props and other materials necessary for setting the scene. While this scene in

¹⁰¹ Painted backdrops, angled set pieces, certain lighting techniques, and deep-focus cinematography were frequently used to enhance the depth of interior sets in narrative films produced during this period (Staiger, 1988: 218-21).

¹⁰² Scodel (2013) 323.

¹⁰³ Eyman (2005: 110) on the other hand claims rather cynically that these interior scenes with the curtain as a backdrop are merely uninspired demonstrations of the production crew's exhaustion as a result of having to build lavish scenes for the more spectacular sequences.

Niblo's film may seem wanting for more cinematic sophistication, it hearkens back to, and honours, the theatrical tradition that characterised a significant part of *Ben-Hur*'s history, and from which the actors in the 1925 film derive gesture as a method of communicating emotions. Although, by positioning the camera at the line of the actors' eyes, and sustaining a closely framed medium shot that *does* clearly register the men's facial expressions for the big screen, Niblo is creating a vantage point for his audience that is very much a result of cinematic artifice and would be impossible to assume from a seat at the theatre.

The matter at stake in this argument, namely the political and social connotations of Roman versus Jewish identity, is treated rather differently from its appearance in Wallace's novel. In the film there is an overtly political element to the identity conflict, evidenced by Messala's remark, 'Your stiff-necked race must learn submission to your masters!' and Ben-Hur's subsequent lament to his mother, 'Messala has shown me—how we are despised!'¹⁰⁴ Emphasis on specific elements of Jewish theology, and the difference between the two men's religious sensibilities, so prominent in Wallace's novel,¹⁰⁵ are scarce in Niblo's film.¹⁰⁶

The peak of tension between Ben-Hur and Messala is the mutual recognition of the failure to reconcile brotherly love and social identity, expressed through each man's appeal to the other to 'Forget you are a Jew!'... 'Forget you are a Roman!' Messala refuses to yield his claim of Rome's racial superiority, despite Ben-Hur's insistence on the primary importance of love ('Ah, Messala! I have loved you as a brother! Let us forget this bitterness'). The sentiment of 'Down Eros, up Mars!' associated with Messala in Wallace's novel is invoked here, and the theme of the failure or triumph of love amidst social or ethnic otherness is echoed in melodramatic scenarios throughout the film, and comes to be associated with Ben-Hur's acceptance of Christ's love at the end of the film.

One character in *Ben-Hur* (1925) inhabits the melodramatic sequences exclusively, and loses her original significance (in Wallace) as the lingering

¹⁰⁴ See Scodel (2013: 327-8) for commentary on this scene with respect to Jewish identity.

¹⁰⁵ The theological debate between Messala and Ben-Hur (*Ben-Hur*, 82-4) precedes the falling out. Other examples of Wallace's interest in Jewish theology include the spiritual counsel Ben-Hur receives from his mother (96-106), Ben-Hur's refusal to allow Arrius to commit suicide by the mandates of Mosaic Law (156), and the internal struggle for Ben-Hur to accept Christ as a spiritual, rather than a political saviour, in the face of the teachings of Judaism (260-2).

¹⁰⁶ The film generally alludes to Ben-Hur's religious convictions insofar as it portrays Ben-Hur's desire to join the messiah in a military campaign to free the Jews from Roman rule, and Ben-Hur's appeal to God to let him be the hand of vengeance for Messala's wrongful condemnation of him and his family. Prolonged meditations on spirituality occur exclusively in a Christian context, with New Testament sources cited in the intertitles.

representative of the melodramatic conflict between Ben-Hur and Messala that remains to be healed after Ben-Hur's conversion to Christianity. Jon Solomon and Ruth Scodel observe that the role of Egyptian Iras is to a large extent diminished from its presence in Wallace's novel, but both scholars approach this as a by-product of narrative expediency—Messala's death in the chariot race provides a neat end to the central melodramatic conflict, and Iras disappears, since she has no reason to try to sabotage Ben-Hur on the orders of her now-dead lover.¹⁰⁷

Niblo identifies Iras' loyalty to Messala in advance of her initial encounter with Ben-Hur, but the power dynamic between Iras and Messala is ambiguous. Iras expresses a clear desire for sexual dominion over men, which she employs the mystique of her Egyptian identity to achieve. When Iras is first introduced, Messala is summoned to her, informing his men, 'Duty calls, and a soldier must obey!' Messala finds Iras reclining on a lavish sofa with a white peacock, a universal symbol of vanity. Her outfit mimics the plumage of the bird beside her; she wears an elaborate silver headdress with feathers emerging from the top. Her posture is relaxed, her arms open to invite Messala into the room. Messala speaks to her: 'Egypt! Egypt! I would drown my soul in your eyes. Give me proof of your love!' He leans in to kiss her, and Iras withdraws playfully, before their lips can touch. The scene gives the impression that Messala is completely subservient to her, although he can still persuade her to find out the true identity of the 'unknown Jew' set to race against him in the arena. Conversely, her acquiescence to his request ultimately demonstrates simply her eagerness to find another man (Ben-Hur) to tame.

Iras' Egyptian identity is again aligned with her ability to dominate the emotions of men, when the Sheik introduces her to Ben-Hur: 'Even Egyptian Iras, whom all men worship, has sought you out!' Iras in Wallace's novel attempts to exert influence over Ben-Hur through the lure of Egyptian folklore, and through her claims to the cultural supremacy of Egypt. In the novel, Ben-Hur equates Iras' speech about Egypt with 'much the same poetry of patriotism' that characterised his mother's '[declamation of] the departed glories of Israel' (*Ben-Hur*, 281). In Niblo's film, Iras achieves sexual domination through elaborate costume and other sensual attributes (such as perfume, which she makes a point of applying in front of men).

When Iras visits Ben-Hur in the tent of Sheik Ilderim, she appears in a medium shot. She is dressed in a bobbed white wig with a headdress of silver lizards (a Medusa

¹⁰⁷ Solomon (2001: 204); Scodel (2013: 320). It is worth noting here that the makers of the 1959 film chose to edit Iras out completely.

suggestion?), a low-cut silver blouse that leaves a wide strip of her midriff bare, and a matching floor-length, skin-tight skirt. She carries what appears to be a sheaf of white feathers in her right hand. She gazes seductively off right, toward Ben-Hur (Fig. 4.8). Her costume reflects the light shone upon it, like her lover Messala's armour in the scene of his falling out with Ben-Hur. Both Messala and Iras represent false impressions of light, and love, as far as Ben-Hur is concerned. The costumes of these characters can be observed in stark contrast to Christ's hand, visualised later in the film as the *source* of light, a metaphor for the one true source of spiritual salvation.



Fig. 4.8: Iras meets Ben-Hur (MGM, *Ben-Hur*, 1925)

Iras' attempted seduction of Ben-Hur (allegedly in order to discover his identity) takes place on a couch in front of a dark curtain, a simple *mise-en-scène* used again to represent a high point of melodramatic emotional focus. The camera in this sequence assumes a pronounced level of authorial influence, instructing the audience to interpret the heightened emotional tension here as specifically *erotic* tension. The use of red tinting transmits a glow of amorous intrigue.¹⁰⁸ The camera captures both Iras and Ben-Hur in a wide shot, standing across the frame from one another, as if they stand as far apart as possible. The camera then assumes Iras' point of view, and pans up from Ben-Hur's feet, gliding over his well-muscled legs and along his torso, finally to rest on his eyes, which look down into the camera, positioned slightly below his eye level to suggest the difference in height between Ben-Hur and Iras.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ For background on uses of tinting and other colouring techniques during the silent era, see Usai (1996).

¹⁰⁹ See Williams' (2012: 131) description of this technique in his discussion of the objectification of the classical male form in *Ben-Hur* (1925).

Niblo acknowledges the female presence in the audience by awarding his spectators the privilege of gazing out from Iras' eyes as she looks Ben-Hur up and down, and sends a ripple of erotic tension that emanates through the room and does not abate until after Ben-Hur leaves due to his discomfort with his own desire. It is clear in the course of their interaction that Iras desires to dominate Ben-Hur (her controlling gaze upon him, in which the audience is complicit, gives this initial impression). When Iras and Ben-Hur are seated at a banquet table with the Sheik later in the sequence, the horses are brought out before them. Ben-Hur gazes admirably at the horses, while Iras gazes at him, and comments, 'Beauty to be tamed! Does it not thrill you?' Although the audience is permitted temporary alignment with Iras in this sequence, Niblo eventually redirects attention to her unequivocal role as the melodramatic antagonist, for whom the audience, from the orientation of 'normative' spectatorship, is supposed to cultivate disdain.¹¹⁰

Certain symptomatic interpretations can be read from Niblo's portrayal of 'Egypt'/Iras and her relationship with the female viewer. The portrayal of Iras' visual Egyptian qualities as her tool for dominion over men is representative of prevalent iconography of the Eastern seductress/'vamp' in American silent cinema,¹¹¹ a paradigm motivated in part by ideological suspicion of the potential for the social and sexual liberty of the New Woman. Maria Wyke's discussion of images of Cleopatra as representations of Hollywood's 'othering' of the New Woman through orientalisation is useful to consider here.¹¹²

Niblo's characterisation of Iras as another Egyptian vamp proved to be an undesirable, almost obsolete cinematic version of the feminine, according to contemporary reviews of her performance (discussed in Section 5). Niblo may have purposefully attributed an out-of-date melodramatic type to Iras' character, in order to enhance her perceptible 'otherness'.¹¹³ Williams argues that Niblo creates a similar sense of 'old' cinematic otherness in the casting of Bushman/Messala, whose cinema career peaked well before *Ben-Hur* (1925), evidenced in part by his performance style, featuring 'static poses that belong overtly to the past'.¹¹⁴ Niblo's type-casting of Carmel

¹¹⁰ Staiger (2000: 34-5) introduces the idea of the 'ideal' or 'normative' spectator's expectations and sympathetic orientations as directed by the cinematic invitations for character sympathy.

¹¹¹ See Section 2 of this chapter for preliminary discussion of the 'vamp'.

¹¹² Wyke (1997) 95-6.

¹¹³ Shepherd (2013a: 232) has observed a similar technique employed by director Cecil B. DeMille in his 1923 film *Ten Commandments*. This film employs camerawork and functions for intertitles reminiscent of early silent cinema in order to enhance the antiquated appearance of the Old Testament episodes in contrast to the contemporary cinematic language used in the 'Modern Story' sequences.

¹¹⁴ Williams (2012) 115-16.

Myers also has the effect of removing the viewer's attention from the film text and reflecting on the evolution of the female form onscreen, a rumination that potentially disrupts the emotional investment in the melodramatic narrative.

Perhaps out of concern for the recognised potential for female stars onscreen to provide models of behaviour for women offscreen,¹¹⁵ Niblo clearly exploits the common negative connotations of Orientalism in his visual portrayal of Iras to underscore her excessive seductiveness, manipulation, and shameless domination of men, as examples of bad feminine morality. After Messala's death, female spectators are left with Esther as the enduring model of traditional female virtue defined by sexual purity, familial love, modesty, and kindness.

The sequences leading up to the chariot race are primarily melodramatic and atmospheric in their focus. In the wager scene anticipating the chariot race sequence, Niblo brings Ben-Hur and Messala face-to-face once again to resume the conflict that led to their initial falling out. The posture the two men take during their inimical reunion (Fig. 4.10) recalls their mirrored stance in the original 'identity stand off', where they challenge one another to 'Forget you are a Roman!...Forget you are a Jew!' (Fig. 4.9). Even the dialogue invites the audience to recall this initial confrontation. Messala bets his entire fortune on his success against Ben-Hur in the race, galvanised by Ben-Hur's challenge (via intertitle): 'Do you forget that you are a Roman, and that I am only a Jew?'

This time the emotional tension is heightened dramatically, now that the audience has witnessed the consequences (Ben-Hur's enslavement, the Hur family's imprisonment) of Messala's strong convictions in his cultural superiority. The camera is closer, and the frame hugs the men's bodies tightly, reflecting a higher octave of mutual hostility between the characters, and suspensefully heightening the stakes of the chariot race. While earlier in the film their costume reveals their social distinction from one another that results in Messala's successful betrayal of Ben-Hur, in the wager scene the men are dressed almost alike, except for the wings that adorn the sides of Messala's helmet. Now that Ben-Hur is an adopted Roman and an accomplished charioteer, he is in a position to rival Messala in the chariot race, the long-awaited resolution to this melodramatic conflict occurring within a Roman space for public athletic competition.

¹¹⁵ Discussed in Parker (2006). Surviving promotional photographs of Ben-Hur and Iras lying on feathered cushions in an embrace (Williams, 2012: 132) suggest that this sequence could have been much more overtly sexual. However, this material was likely edited out of the final cut due to the risk of censors' finding them morally reprehensible.



Fig. 4.9: The argument (MGM, *Ben-Hur*, 1925)



Fig. 4.10: The wager (MGM, *Ben-Hur*, 1925)

This presents a contrast to the domestic setting for the original confrontation between Messala as military conqueror and Ben-Hur as a member of the oppressed Judaeen population.

Instead of a curtain, a shadowed huddle of Roman onlookers serves as the background for the men's re-enactment of their original falling out. These figures are not clearly discernible from the perspective of the audience at the cinema, implying that from the perspective of Messala and Ben-Hur, their presence is not of great concern. At the same time, the arrangement of extras in a tight semi-circle around Messala and Ben-Hur encourages the spectators in the cinema to see themselves as completing the circle of onlookers.

The atmospheric build-up to the chariot race emphasises the grandiosity of the event, particularly in terms of its public appeal. An expository intertitle announces, 'Still they came—all Antioch, thousands upon thousands—to see the great race'. There follows a quick succession of wide shots from above and at ground level of hundreds of people milling around amidst the bases of enormous columns. A group of female extras dressed in elaborate orientalist costume—the 'who's who' of Antioch—are captured in medium shot, looking off left. The camera cuts to a parallel shot of the crowd, with individuals carried in litters amidst the poorer pedestrians. The arena is thus a place to people-watch, and to exhibit wealth and social status. Niblo, in keeping with Wallace (*Ben-Hur*, 331), retains a keen interest in the viewers, with a quasi-ethnographic interest.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Morsberger and Morsberger (1980: 493) contrast this with Wyler's 1959 chariot race, where the audience is 'comparatively lifeless' throughout the sequence.

The charioteers enter the arena, and the camera matches shots of Esther watching Ben-Hur at the start line and Iras watching Messala. Each woman is watching her man in the competition, and the crucial function of the chariot race in the melodramatic plotline is highlighted—if Ben-Hur wins, both principal antagonists lose, and due to the wager, they lose sorely. The charioteers are packed into a line, and the suspense builds as the camera pans along the line of attendants desperately attempting to untangle the rearing horses from the reins and wheels before the race begins. Although Wallace meticulously grants names and nationalities to all of the competitors, and follows their varied fates throughout the race, Niblo does not take time to identify the other competitors, besides the Greek charioteer, whom Messala chastises for getting in his way while he pursues Ben-Hur. Ben-Hur's team of white horses contrasts powerfully with Messala's black team, so that the audience can keep track of the progress of these two throughout the race.

When the chariot race is under way, the audience is confronted with seemingly haphazard images, from wide shots to close-ups, of the chariots, the arena, the viewers, the horses, and the faces of the charioteers from all angles (including underneath the horses' hooves), edited together into a rapid montage. Those audience members familiar with the Klaw and Erlanger production would have been confronted with the use of cinematic artifice to create a hyper-realistic, omnipresent perspective for the viewer that challenged the stageplay's capacity to thrill with the immediacy of live horses running on treadmills. Most of the angles the forty-two cameras provided for audiences at the cinema would have been physically impossible from the point of view of a spectator at an actual arena, let alone from the vantage point of a patron at a theatre.¹¹⁷

Eventually the melodramatic focus comes to the fore, as the camera maintains longer and steadier shots of Messala and Ben-Hur. The emotional climax of the contest occurs when the men are neck-and-neck, and Messala strikes Ben-Hur with his whip, in an attempt to incapacitate his opponent and simultaneously remind him of his former identity as a slave.¹¹⁸ Messala, after linking wheels with Ben-Hur, crashes his chariot and is pinned beneath it. Messala's crashed chariot causes a pileup of other chariots, allowing Ben-Hur to make the final turn with a safe lead, and to win the race. The final shots that conclude the sequence bring a clear resolution to the conflict of the central melodrama. Ben-Hur appears in an iris, celebrating his victory, and the camera cuts to a

¹¹⁷ Richards (2008) 45.

¹¹⁸ Morsberger and Morsberger (1980: 493) mention Wyler's retention of this moment in his 1959 rendering of the chariot race.

wide shot of the arena, showing Ben-Hur in the background, his back to the audience, while in the foreground the dead Messala is carried away.

Perhaps the closest attempt at a detailed analysis of Niblo's chariot race in currently published scholarship is a discussion of the various stages of the race in the play-by-play record of Wyler's 1959 rendering,¹¹⁹ which contains references to Niblo's 1925 version from time to time as a point of comparison.¹²⁰ Even Howard Miller does not offer a close reading of Niblo's chariot race, despite his high valuation of it as a 'nine-minute race of breathtaking speed, intensity, danger, and excitement that may be the most effective rendering of the great contest in the entire Ben-Hur tradition'.¹²¹ Despite the scarcity of sustained critical readings, these secondary sources offer commentary that can further inform observations in this analysis. For instance, Robert and Katherine Morsberger observe that the 1925 chariot race is a 'straightforward' competition, while in Wyler's 1959 version the addition of spikes on the wheels of Messala's chariot adds a strong element of fear and apprehension as the charioteers prepare for the race; the camera returns to the spikes to evaluate the sabotage the various competitors suffer from Messala.¹²² By contrast, Niblo creates a general feeling of suspense by drawing attention away from Messala and Ben-Hur periodically. This is evidenced perhaps most acutely by the inclusion of a wide shot of a group of chariots coming dangerously close to the 'clean-up crew' of attendants working frantically to get the wreckage of a crashed chariot out of the way in time.

Scholarship on the use of spectacle in films contemporary to *Ben-Hur* (1925) elucidates the potential for Niblo's chariot race to draw upon models from early cinematic tradition as influences for the *type* of emotional engagement it invites audiences to have with the images onscreen. David Shepherd postulates that a reminiscence of the early 'cinema of attractions' influenced Cecil B. DeMille's ubiquitous use of spectacle in the Old Testament scenes from *The Ten Commandments* (1923).¹²³ By the mid-1920s, cinema had become preoccupied with plot narration and character development, and had twenty years before abandoned the primary impetus of

¹¹⁹ Morsberger and Morsberger (1980) 492-3.

¹²⁰ Jon Solomon (2001: 208-213) offers a much more meticulous summary of Wyler's chariot race sequence, assuming the perspective of an avid spectator ('We marvel at [the horses'] dark manes and forelocks flying behind....We have Ben-Hur's vantage point...'). Although Solomon mentions Niblo's chariot race, he discusses the story of its production and does not include a commentary on the sequence (204).

¹²¹ Miller (2008) 167.

¹²² Morsberger and Morsberger (1980) 492.

¹²³ Shepherd (2013b) 271. For 'cinema of attractions' see Gunning (1996). For discussion on the relationship between Kalem Studios' *Ben-Hur* (1907) and the cinema of attractions, see Chapter 3 Section 5.

turn-of-the-century films, which exhibited objects or scenes in order to thrill, and to engage the audience's desire to look, or 'scopophilia' (to use Metz's term),¹²⁴ especially if the object of the viewer's focus had a component of eroticism, extravagance, danger, or fantasy.

The vestiges of the cinema of attractions can be read in the composition of Niblo's chariot race, which aims to create a sensory experience of excitement and suspense. Annemone Ligensa, in alignment with Ben Singer, observes that the component of sensationalism was actually widespread in narrative feature films produced in the silent era, due to the enhanced emotional appeal of the combination of narrative and spectacle: 'a longer, more complex narrative could even heighten sensationalism by adding suspense to spectacle'.¹²⁵ Thus, many audiences were *expecting* to see the chariot race rendered with a concern for creating a visual experience that is fast-paced, thrilling, and even death defying, which the authorial agency of the camera allows to be seen via innovative viewing perspectives and capacities.

The chariot race's emotional appeal to audiences to immerse themselves in scopophilia is then embedded within a greater narrative concern for the fate of the sympathetic protagonist.¹²⁶ The chariot race functions as both the climax of and the *final* resolution to the melodramatic conflict between Ben-Hur and Messala.¹²⁷ After Messala's body is removed from the arena, the camera cuts to a medium close-up of Iras laughing inappropriately.¹²⁸ This is the last glimpse of the melodramatic antagonists, whose conflict with Ben-Hur is not furthered throughout Ben-Hur's emotional and moral development toward Christian conversion, as is the case in Wallace's novel. At this point in the film, the only element of the melodramatic narrative to be resolved is Ben-Hur's reunion with his family, an event that cannot happen without Ben-Hur's conversion to Christianity, and Christ's healing of the Hur family from leprosy. The religious elements of the narrative, including glimpses of Christ's life, and Ben-Hur's attempts to find his family and to marshal an army for the messiah, thus determine the course of the remainder of the film.

Following the resolution of the melodramatic plotline, the melodramatic and atmospheric emotional appeals to the audience diminish to a large extent as the

¹²⁴ Metz (1983) 58-9.

¹²⁵ Ligensa (2012) 173.

¹²⁶ Morsberger and Morsberger (1980) 493.

¹²⁷ Scodel (2013: 323) emphasises the hermeneutic significance of Messala's death (as opposed to his permanent crippling and bankruptcy) to audience perceptions of Ben-Hur's Jewish identity.

¹²⁸ Nosler, L. (1 February 1926). 'Cutting Continuity'. Turner MGM Scripts, *Ben-Hur*, B-901. AMPAS.

religious point of focus takes precedence, and the character of Christ is featured in episodes from the Gospels. Niblo's *Ben-Hur* unequivocally features Christ as a spiritual, not a historical, figure. Neither the expository intertitles nor the other characters in the film refer to him as Jesus, but 'the Nazarene' (as in Wallace), 'The Holy Child of Bethlehem', or 'Messiah'. In the Axt and Mendoza score, Christ's *leitmotif* is a hymn, 'Fairest Lord Jesus', first heard when Christ gives Ben-Hur the water at the well, and is played to accompany Christ's subsequent appearances.¹²⁹ The actor in the role of Christ (albeit represented only by a hand) is not listed among the characters in the opening credits, creating the impression that Christ really *does* appear onscreen before the audience without the help of filmmaking technology or personnel. The audience's view of Christ's body is limited to his hand, from which a light emanates, illuminating the face of the person in front of him. The tension between Christ's corporeality and ethereal nature is ever present, but his divinity is never in question.

In adherence to the novel, the film embeds the melodramatic narrative within the Life of Christ story, beginning and ending with Christ's Nativity and Crucifixion, respectively. As mentioned in Section 2, the film departs from the novel by frequently interspersing recognisable episodes from Christ's life with the stages of the melodramatic narrative, creating something like a Passion Play of biblical events that runs alongside Ben-Hur's adventures. The frequency of these biblical *tableaux* increases following the chariot race. The Woman Taken in Adultery, Palm Sunday, the Last Supper, and the Judgement of Christ by Pontius Pilate all appear in the third act of the film. For audiences, these sequences would have been readily distinguishable from ones with a melodramatic focus, due to their appearance in Technicolor, and their incorporation of quotations from the Gospels produced on intertitles with a background made to resemble an ancient, faded manuscript.¹³⁰ The combination of the colour, the hymn, and the illuminated Gospel quotations creates a sense of reverence both for spectators desiring to engage with Christ's message of salvation and healing, and for those invested in a more secular, aesthetic appreciation of the film's use of colour and emulation of religious painting.

It is worth noting that while these *tableaux* are meant to be visually stunning, they are intended to inspire a type of emotional experience in audiences that differs from that evoked by the spectacle sequences of the naval battle and the chariot race.

¹²⁹ Morsberger and Morsberger (1980) 490.

¹³⁰ Scodel (2013) 321.

Spectacular sequences do not use Technicolor, but their cinematography is much more elaborate, while the camera is very static in the religious sequences, as if to increase the sense of immediacy surrounding the audiences' encounters with the onscreen religious figures. Niblo elsewhere provides opportunities for his audiences to indulge their desire for spectacle, and even encourages an association between spectacle and erotic objectification of the male form (such as in Iras' encounter with Ben-Hur). However, he adheres to Wallace's general treatment of the religious episodes as separate from the spectacular ones, and does *not* eroticise the religious material, unlike contemporary Cecil B. DeMille,¹³¹ in what Craig Detweiler calls a signature 'patented blend of sex and salvation'.¹³²

A closer look at three specific Christ episodes, namely the Woman Taken in Adultery, the Last Supper, and the moment of Ben-Hur's conversion when he meets Christ on the Via Dolorosa, allows for an observation of the range of artistic decisions Niblo uses to render the biblical events. This in turn will elucidate the ways in which this film, like Wallace's novel, simultaneously engages with contemporary Christian debates, and as Ruth Scodel has observed, avoids highlighting denominational distinctions.¹³³

The Woman Taken in Adultery does not appear in Wallace's novel, but takes place in Niblo's film just after Ben-Hur, having won the chariot race, leaves the Sheik's tent to muster legions for the messiah's military campaign. Arguably, Niblo inserts this sequence in order to provide a contrast between Ben-Hur's image of the worldly messiah and Christ's true identity as a spiritual saviour. The sequence opens with a medium shot of a crowd of men standing on steps, throwing stones down to the left. The shot widens to show a prostrate woman in the foreground, while the men continue to throw stones. A glowing white hand emerges from the left-hand frame, and through an intertitle Christ is quoted from John: 'He that is without sin among you: let him first cast a stone at her'. The camera cuts back to the wide shot where the woman sits up and gazes in wonder at the hand. Light falls on her face and she clasps her hands together in medium close-up and shuts her eyes as she receives Christ's forgiveness.

¹³¹ Soares (2010) 101.

¹³² Detweiler (2009) 111. See Shepherd (2013b) for a treatment of DeMille's signature embedding of 'unscriptural sexual spectacle' (272) within biblical narratives as apparent in *The Ten Commandments* (1923). On the other hand, through his incorporation of spectacular elements from Wallace elsewhere in the film, Niblo strives to identify *Ben-Hur* within the contemporary, and highly successful, 'biblical epic' genre, whose alignment of visual grandiosity and biblical themes were modelled previously by Guazzoni's *Quo Vadis?* (1912), Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), and DeMille's *Ten Commandments* (1923) (Walsh, 2013: 222).

¹³³ Scodel (2013) 329. See Section 2 of this chapter for discussion of the contemporary 'social gospel' movement in American Protestantism.

This sequence exemplifies several patterns of cinematic composition featured in other religious sequences. Firstly, the camera lingers on the face of the woman who encounters the holy presence, and captures the transformation in her facial expression, inviting the audience to experience the solemnity of an animated Bible reading. Secondly, the illuminated quotation from the Gospel (Fig. 4.11) creates an effect of biblical authenticity for the action onscreen.

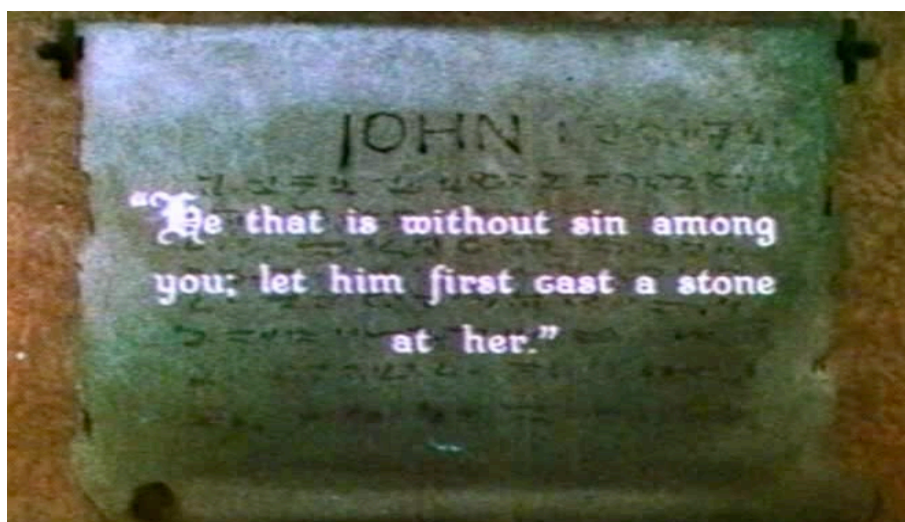


Fig. 4.11: Bible quotation (MGM, *Ben-Hur*, 1925)

The Gospel according to John from which this episode is derived reveals a very different depiction of this event. In John 8:1-11, the woman is not stoned by a mob, but is taken by the Pharisees and other interpreters of religious law to Christ at the Temple. Her captors inform him that according to Mosaic Law she *should* be stoned, but they ask his opinion of the woman's deserved punishment. At this point, Christ stoops down and writes something (unidentified) in the dust, before standing up to deliver the quotation in Fig. 4.11. Thus, the only element of Niblo's rendering that is consistent with the Gospel is, ironically, the quotation.

Niblo's visual interpretation of this episode also indicates his refrain from the use of Bible illustrations by Gustave Doré as influences for the biblical sequences, a noted contrast to the cinematic representations of his artwork in biblical epics directed by Cecil B. DeMille and D.W. Griffith within the same decade as *Ben-Hur* (1925).¹³⁴ Niblo's 'Woman Taken in Adultery' does not resemble the illustration in Doré,¹³⁵ who depicts Christ, the writing next to his feet, standing beside the woman and gesturing toward a group of men, clearly a visual representation of John 8:1-11.

¹³⁴ Apostolos-Cappadona (2009: 451) describes the broad circulation of Doré's illustrations among Protestant American communities in both large-folio and smaller format editions.

¹³⁵ Reproduced in Apostolos-Cappadona (2009: 452).

There are several plausible reasons, all presuming the film's engagement to some extent with contemporary religious issues, why Niblo may have decided against producing an image that accurately reflected the event in John, and/or translating Doré's work specifically onto the screen. Firstly, Niblo's portrayal of Christ as an *agent* of compassion, actively interfering while the stoning is taking place, upholds (and glamourises) the new 1920s social gospel message, which recast Christ as a masculine deliverer of diplomacy and compassion in social situations. This impression is underscored by Christ's posture—he is in a physical position of superiority, standing protectively over the woman. Niblo may have also purposefully excluded Doré as a primary influence on his biblical depictions due to the artist's familiarity among specifically Protestant readers. Doré's illustrations were printed in the King James Version of the Bible, whose readers would have engaged in biblical study as a religious practice, while Catholics for the most part adhered to the Douay-Rheims version of the Bible from the St. Jerome's Vulgate.¹³⁶ Niblo's reinterpretation of the biblical episodes, and, in the case of the Nativity and Last Supper, his allusion to famous Renaissance paintings, would have rendered his religious material more accessible to viewers of all denominations of Christianity, as well as to non-Christians.

In *The Last Supper*, Niblo offers a visual portrayal of a recognisable biblical episode that both showcases the capacity for film to animate a specific painting from which the images onscreen are inspired, and omits liturgical specificity, retaining the universal Christian spirit of love, peace, and salvation that pervades the religious portion of the film. Niblo's close rendering of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* follows the scene in which Ben-Hur's family is released from prison as lepers, indicating that this event in the religious narrative is happening synchronically with, or occurs just after, the release of the Hur family. Quotations from the Gospels of Matthew and John function as intertitles.

This sequence is also in Technicolor, and opens with a wide shot of the table at which Christ and the disciples sit (Fig. 4.12). This is not a precise rendering, for in Niblo's version one of the disciples (presumably Judas) sits in the foreground, on the audience's side of table, blocking Christ from view (although the halo of his divinity is visible). Christ raises his hands, and the 'new commandment I give unto you—that ye love one another' is given via the intertitle—a quotation from the Gospel according to John. In this sequence, the camera allows the viewer a privileged perspective on the scene from various angles, in effect immersing the viewer into the original painting.

¹³⁶ Higashi (1994) 180.

Three of the apostles sitting to Christ's left (from the audience's vantage point) are captured in medium close-up gazing off right toward Christ, and bowing their heads in response to Christ's statement. The immediacy of these figures' reactions to the words invites the audience (or congregation) to become a part of the painting—to bow their heads along with the disciples. The camera cuts back to the original long shot; all figures have their heads bowed (except Judas, whose posture is unchanged). All raise their heads and freeze as if the film has transformed back into a static painting.



Fig. 4.12: Last Supper (MGM, *Ben-Hur*, 1925)

This sequence demonstrates the powerful metamorphic quality of cinema, the ability to present a painting in a dynamic relationship with its source, the Bible (in this case, *not* Wallace—there is no Last Supper scene in the novel). Moreover, this segment of *Ben-Hur* explores the potential for film to expand its capacity for ‘authenticity’, through the rendering of a significant biblical event through an adherence to recognisable iconography.¹³⁷ Spectators are encouraged to believe that they have gained privileged access, a greater immediacy with the painting in particular, through both the camera's exploration of the space and the animation of the characters.

At the same time, the alteration of the painting blocks visual access to Christ at the centre of the table, despite Christ's clear corporeal rendering in da Vinci's painting. This effect may actually invite the viewer to experience a greater sense of immediacy with Christ, and even devotion. By removing suggestions of later denominational interpretations of the Last Supper (for instance, the Catholic Sacrament of Communion) and suggesting that the audience is privy to a sacred presence whose essence cannot be

¹³⁷ Diana Apostolos-Cappadona (2009: 443-4) stresses the importance of visual allusions to works by the ‘great masters of religious art’, such as da Vinci and Michelangelo, along with Bible illustrations, to the creation of ‘an aura of both authenticity and reality to a film’ through their invocation of ‘collective memory...of what Jesus, Mary, and other biblical figures looked like’.

communicated through visual media, this sequence gives the impression that Niblo's Last Supper is the origin of later ritualistic commemorations and artistic renderings of this event, that Niblo's Last Supper is the *real* Last Supper. This aspect of the Last Supper in *Ben-Hur* is readily appreciable when compared to the corresponding scene from Kalem Studios' highly praised Life of Christ narrative *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912), known as the 'American Passion Play'.¹³⁸ The sequence begins with the title 'The First Communion', and includes the quotation from Luke 22:20: 'This is my body...', followed by an image of Christ handing bread to each man, the rest with their heads bowed in prayer, resembling a priest (Fig. 4.13). The ritualistic aspect of this treatment, beginning from the naming of it as 'The First Communion', places the Last Supper in the context of liturgical practice.



Fig. 4.13: First Communion (Kalem, *From the Manger to the Cross*, 1912)

The Via Dolorosa sequence contains the crucial merging of melodramatic and religious sequences through the conversion of Ben-Hur to Christianity, which happens at the Crucifixion in Wallace's novel. Although the site of the conversion in the film is *not* the Crucifixion, Niblo employs the physical proximity of Ben-Hur to Christ in order to communicate the profound shift in Ben-Hur's emotional experience from indignation and the desire to fight for Christ to peace and spiritual conviction. Ben-Hur appears in medium iris close-up gazing upon the face of Christ, whose hand and divine light are visible to the audience (Fig. 4.14). There follows an intertitle with a direct statement from Christ to Ben-Hur that influences him to transform his thinking (and his faith).

¹³⁸ Abel (2012) 353.



Fig. 4.14: Ben-Hur's conversion (MGM, *Ben-Hur*, 1925)

The quotation is actually a combination of quotations by Christ from the Gospel of John, repurposed here to create an individual message for Ben-Hur: 'My kingdom is not of this world. Put up thy sword, for the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them'.¹³⁹ In the following medium shot of Ben-Hur, he drops his sword, an action that signifies his spiritual transformation and conversion to Christianity. The theological issue that determines Ben-Hur's conversion is his release from a conviction in Christ as a martial leader, and even here this is very carefully not identified explicitly as a Jewish tenet, nor are the finer points of this theological shift debated or explained further (as they are in Wallace's novel leading up to the Crucifixion). Niblo solicits his audience's engagement with the Christian material on a general, non-denominational spiritual level, and, like Wallace, invites viewers to experience a personal audience with Christ, and an internal, emotional experience of faith, through the provision of Ben-Hur's intimate contact with him.

Although the camera provides a suggestion of Christ's bodily suffering, by means of a medium close-up of bloody footprints in the Via Dolorosa sequence, the overall impression of Christ the audience receives in this sequence and in the following Crucifixion sequence are of his divine composure, and his desire to cultivate as much healing and forgiveness as possible during his final moments on earth. Christ's anguish on the cross, as communicated in Wallace's novel, is absent here. The almost complete denial of a Passion scene in Niblo's film serves as another notable contrast with *From the Manger to the Cross*, which includes a graphic sequence of the Romans' violent

¹³⁹ This is reminiscent of Wallace's adoption of John 11:25 to occur in dialogue with Ben-Hur's thoughts. As Ben-Hur gazes up at the crucified Christ, and meditates on the afterlife, Christ says, 'I am the Resurrection and the Life'.

scourging of Christ (represented in complete bodily form by an actor), who, as Richard Fox describes, 'is severely bloodied and bowed before he gets to Calvary. Yet he still has enough energy to squirm in pain and fright when his feet and hands are nailed to the cross'.¹⁴⁰

Ben-Hur's mother and sister also meet Christ on the Via Dolorosa, and are healed from leprosy. Meticulous editing of individual frames in rapid sequence shows the process of transformation of the women's facial features as they are restored to health. After Ben-Hur reunites with his family on the Via Dolorosa, he does not appear again until the final Technicolor scene, following the Crucifixion. The film ends with a wide shot of Jerusalem, with Ben-Hur in a monk's robe standing on a balcony with his mother and Esther, while three crosses stand on the hilltop in the far background, surrounded by a soft glow. The transformation in Ben-Hur's costume from armour to robe underscores the theme of metamorphosis that underlies all of the religious sequences discussed above. As Babington and Evans have observed, the 'discreet abandonment' of the skullcap, and the assumption of monastic robes, makes his conversion appear more implicit, more internally focused, than Wallace's completion of it through Ben-Hur's donation of money to the Roman catacombs.¹⁴¹ Niblo thus instructs the viewer to be 'reborn' in the viewing process through an encounter with Christ, as the sympathetic principal protagonists have been, as evidenced by Ben-Hur's final statement, 'He is not dead—He will live forever in the hearts of men'.

It is clear that through these four categories of sequences Niblo incorporates cinematic techniques that consistently reinforce the following patterns of solicitation for audiences' emotional engagement: sympathy with peripheral and principal characters in atmospheric and melodramatic situations; the acute thrill of entertainment and awe in the multidimensional perspective of cinema in the spectacular sequences; and the slow-paced, solemn, spiritual reflection in religious episodes. The scenes discussed above by no means represent an exhaustive analysis of the emotional invitations present in *Ben-Hur*. There are other scenes in the film—the meeting between Christ and Ben-Hur at the well; the adoption of Ben-Hur by Arrius; and the liberation of the lepers from the prison—that operate within these patterns of onscreen solicitation for audiences' emotional engagement, and visualise scenes from Wallace's novel that over decades had acquired strong collective interpretations and associations in American culture. The question of whether audiences sought to re-experience any of these predominant

¹⁴⁰ Fox (2005) 309.

¹⁴¹ Babington and Evans (1993) 201.

patterns of emotional engagement with the film beyond the initial viewing experience can be evaluated through a discussion (Section 4) of contemporary documentation.

4.4. AUDIENCE RECEPTION OF *BEN-HUR* (1925): PROMOTION, CONSUMPTION, CRITICISM, AND REFRAMING

The dynamics of emotion in the popular cultural reception of *Ben-Hur* (1925) develop rather differently in comparison with those seen in the individual testimonies of reader response to *Ben-Hur* (1880), or critics' description of audiences' engagement with the Klaw and Erlanger *Ben-Hur* (1899-1920) at the theatre. This difference in part is due to the complexity of the interaction between the studio and the spectator, mediated not only through the film text but also through consumer products encouraging a prolonged, extra-cinematic engagement with the film, such as the fan magazine, the film programme sold at the cinema, or themed merchandise. These venues for interaction between the studio as 'author' of the film text and the audience arguably limit the capacity for researchers to analyse the individual impressions of 'ordinary' spectators (neither professional critics nor members of the Hollywood industry)¹⁴² to the extent to which impressions of individual readers of the novel could be read. Yet, they can provide valuable insight into other aspects of the audience experience, such as advertising strategies, for which there is not very much evidence in the case of the novel's reception. Amidst the vast amount of material that survives to document the cultural reception of *Ben-Hur* (1925) through advertising pressbooks, newspaper reviews, fan club circulars, fan magazines, programmes, and spectators' scrapbooks, four primary themes emerge to reflect a chronologically progressive representation of audiences' engagement with the film and extra-cinematic discourse. The consecutive discussion of these core themes will constitute the structure of this section's analysis. This method reflects the attempt in previous chapters to maintain chronology in the analysis of material involving audience response, and in the case of *Ben-Hur* (1925), it will underscore the transformative influence of contemporary debates on morality in the cinema upon interpretations of the film, and its reported emotional impact on audiences.

1. Promotion: material available to audiences *before* the initial release of the film anticipates emotional responses to various affective elements of the film. It is possible

¹⁴² Stacey (1991: 144) describes the challenge of investigating audience members' impressions of films and their stars in past decades.

to identify these solicitations for emotional engagement on the basis of the major patterns of emotional engagement established in the film analysis (atmospheric, melodramatic, spectacular, and religious).

2. Consumption: these documents influence or represent audiences' consumption of and affective relationship to the film either *at* the cinema (in the case of cinema programmes and associated advertisements) or *following* the filmgoing experience (in publications, particularly fan magazines, that encourage a certain manner of relating to the film and represent viewers' attitudes toward the film). The relationship these materials suggest between the star system and the sustained emotional engagement solicited from spectators is also addressed.¹⁴³

3. Criticism: emotional responses to the film are sometimes articulated in reviews written by professional critics and produced by industry publications and newspapers (mostly following, but in some cases preceding the film's release).

4. Reframing: this refers to the dynamics of emotion in the production, promotion and public discourse surrounding the 1931 re-release of *Ben-Hur* with synchronised music and sound effects. The re-release can be categorised as a reception of the 1925 film, since it is a product directly associated with *Ben-Hur* (1925), generated presumably in response to the high level of public consumption of the original film. The theme of 'reframing' will present itself through documentation referring to the censorship guidelines placed upon *Ben-Hur* prior to its re-release, and to the issue of shifts in promotion strategy for the film within the era when sound, dialogue included, was synchronised.¹⁴⁴

Each of the themes outlined above yields a valuable glimpse of the continued interaction between studio and audience. This interaction becomes a kind of dance of interpretations, where filmmakers and audiences swap the role of the leader in determining the predominant impression of the film in popular culture.¹⁴⁵ Promotional and advertising material prior to the release of the film demonstrates MGM's effort to market to potential audience groups, identified in many cases according to the element

¹⁴³ See Dyer (1998: 60-61) for discussion of the studio's role in publicity and promotion of films in fan magazines.

¹⁴⁴ Bordwell and Thompson (2010) 177-9.

¹⁴⁵ Archives with materials represented in this section include: NYPL; BDCM; CDPL; APD; USC; MHP; and AMPAS.

of the narrative that should appeal to them (specific scenes in the film tend to be associated with atmospheric, melodramatic, spectacular, and religious points of emotional focus), and the type of emotional response they may seek to experience at the cinema, often depending on religious or gender background.¹⁴⁶ Promotional material is produced by MGM for distribution by exhibitors (as we find in pressbooks), or is visible in publications by affiliate promoters (as in anticipatory features in fan magazines).¹⁴⁷

The content of programmes distributed at the cinemas allows a glimpse of the studio's invitation for audiences' engagement with the film in the immediate viewing context. Advertisements for consumer products associated with *Ben-Hur* (1925), and the discourse on the film and its stars appearing in fan magazines following the initial release of the film, represent viewers' 'postmovie talk',¹⁴⁸ in part influenced by MGM, and in part functioning independently of the studio's preferences for reception activities. Within the category of 'postmovie talk' also appear individual viewers' impressions of the film, represented either in letters to the editor of fan magazines or in unpublished scrapbooks.

Criticism of *Ben-Hur* (1925) written by professional reviewers, for both regional newspapers and nationally circulated industry magazines, represents the perspectives of individuals working within, or at least familiar with, the film industry. In many cases these reviews analyse the film aesthetically, thematically, or narratologically within greater concerns for its contemporary significance to the socio-cultural function of film and film culture, and for *Ben-Hur*'s position within the narrative tradition of Wallace's novel. However, the critic's individual opinion, attitude, and emotional engagement with the film is not always overshadowed by these theoretical discussions, and the critic often provides would-be audiences of *Ben-Hur* (1925) a model of emotional response to the film delivered by a well-informed spectator.

The analysis of the circumstances of the 1931 re-release will focus particularly on the dynamics of emotion manifested in the following aspects of the film's production, promotion, and reception: the anxiety of state censorship boards about the potential reception of images of a violent or a sexual nature; the studio's anticipation for

¹⁴⁶ A British pressbook (1926, BDCM) has a feature entitled, 'Praise from the Pulpit', which quotes church leaders' testimonies to the film's ability to create a 'stirred and reverent' audience.

¹⁴⁷ Dyer (1998: 61) mentions fan magazines' long-established tendency toward complicity with studios in the representation of film stars and the promotion of films that contribute to the star image.

¹⁴⁸ Staiger (2000: 51-2) uses this term to emphasise the importance of considering fan discourse and activities in order 'to analyze the ideological, cultural, and personal effects of film viewing'.

an enthusiastic response among audiences to the aural enhancement of the visual elements of the film; and the self-reported emotional responses of viewers to the filmgoing experience in comparison with their anticipated response.

This section will aim to understand the ways in which emotions characterise promotional messages and receptive discourse,¹⁴⁹ both of which are implicated in the audience's experience of deriving meaning from *Ben-Hur* (1925) and potentially integrating this meaning into their lives.¹⁵⁰ With this comes an interest in the extent to which spectators of *Ben-Hur* (1925) perceived themselves as passively receiving and/or generating 'active' receptions of the film, similar to those observed in the activities of interpretative communities within the novel's readership (discussed in Chapter 2).

Promotion

MGM's promotion campaign honoured the significant cultural impact of the novel, and Wallace's authorial identity, and ventured to align the filmmakers' agenda closely with Wallace. Some promotional materials attempt to represent the production process as a kind of spectacular melodrama in itself. In *Photoplay*, Ruth Waterbury (a famous writer for fan magazines in the silent era)¹⁵¹ associates the film's 'great appeal to mankind' with the 'titanic struggle' of filmmaking necessary to produce it:

There was real drama and sacrifice in the making of it, and, what is more, fine faith and reverence, without which the picture would have failed, for this is the Tale of the Christ. The story of this production is the story of men who staked their fortunes, of men who risked their careers, their very lives, to realize the perfect picturization of General Lew Wallace's powerful story. Their reward on the opening night was a mighty roll of cheers that went up spontaneously from people who saw in it an inspired work of consecration, one that reaches beyond all race and creed into the hearts of men.¹⁵²

This promotional angle uses religious language ('sacrifice', 'consecration') to legitimise the spiritual value of *Ben-Hur* (1925), by highlighting the supposed Christian inspiration that had contributed to the film's production, clearly reminiscent of Wallace's own story of conversion during the novel's composition, as spelled out in his lecture, 'How I Came to Write Ben-Hur'. The article also describes the transmission of the 'fine faith and reverence' of the filmmaking to a receptive audience present at the

¹⁴⁹ Some sources demonstrate overlap between these categories of reception. While fan magazines on the one hand contained studio-directed promotional material, such as interviews with the filmmakers and star features, the film reviews in fan magazines do not necessarily express a consistently clear alignment with the goals of the film studio, and sometimes even undercut them.

¹⁵⁰ This question reflects a fundamental issue (clearly spelled out in Marsh, 2011: 256-7) currently being explored by film historians with a special interest in spectatorship.

¹⁵¹ Stamp (2012) 195.

¹⁵² Waterbury, R. (March 1926). 'A Modern Miracle Film'. *Photoplay*, 32. MHP.

film's premiere, who allegedly interpreted the film as a 'consecration' that would be universally acknowledged as such.

The association between the humble 'sacrifice' of the film's production process with the allegedly adverse conditions of the Italian shooting location suggests rather implicitly that the filmmakers, although operating under the same divine inspiration as Wallace was, still had to undergo challenges similar to those faced by Wallace's protagonist under the influence of modern 'Romans' in the Italian film industry. Yet this article also communicates a kind of necessity—the filmmakers had to meet challenges in the land of the 'other' in order to produce work as truly sacred as Wallace's novel. Indeed, while the film was shooting in Italy in December 1924, 'a well-publicised audience with [Pope] Pius XI conferred the sanctification to Novarro and the rest of the cast'.¹⁵³ Wallace's novel had been blessed by Pope Leo XIII in 1895 when the Holy See had sponsored an abridged translation of *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* into Italian.¹⁵⁴ Thus, MGM offered a publicised (and dramatised) narrative of the film's production to those would-be audience members who were concerned about the film's potential to carry on the reverential spirit of Wallace's novel.

Other promotional documents indicate attempts to capture the interest of pre-existing communities of potential viewers, like the Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur. The Tribe was even permitted a privileged glimpse of the film's production. In *The Chariot*, one Son of Hur describes the two months he spent in Rome visiting the 'miniature city' constructed for the purpose of filming *Ben-Hur*. He was even invited to participate as an extra in the Joppa Gate scene.¹⁵⁵ A promotional photograph of Ramon Novarro as the slave Ben-Hur accompanying this article hearkens back to the importance of Ben-Hur's enslavement, and subsequent liberation and adoption by Quintus Arrius, to the Tribe's initial ritual for new members. Such advertisements attempted to draw a meaningful link from the film to the tradition of American cultural reception of *Ben-Hur* that preceded it.

The studio also directed advertising to pre-existing fan networks surrounding the stars of the film. In a questions and answers section from the October 1925 issue of fan magazine *Picture Play*, the columnist publishes her response to a letter sent to her by a self-professed 'Ramonite', who is said to have asked for the release date of *Ben-Hur* and a personal interview with Ramon Novarro. This encouragement of fans' interest in

¹⁵³ Williams (2012) 125-6.

¹⁵⁴ Morsberger and Morsberger (1980) 448-9.

¹⁵⁵ Sebastian, F. (May 1925). 'Ben Hur to be the Greatest Motion Picture'. *The Chariot*, 30 (5), 1-2. CDPL.

a film on the basis of their desire to enhance their emotional affinity with a particular star is representative of fan magazines' (and by extension, studios') campaigns to advertise *Ben-Hur* to suit the interests of stars' pre-existing fan networks. Even trade magazines anticipated Novarro's sex appeal to be a major draw for female audiences well before the release of the film. In Fig. 4.15, Novarro appears as a (nude?) galley slave. He looks away from the camera, rendering the viewer's desiring gaze upon his exposed body unsolicited and voyeuristic, but also dominating—appraising him for her potential purchase, since he appears as an advertisement for himself.¹⁵⁶

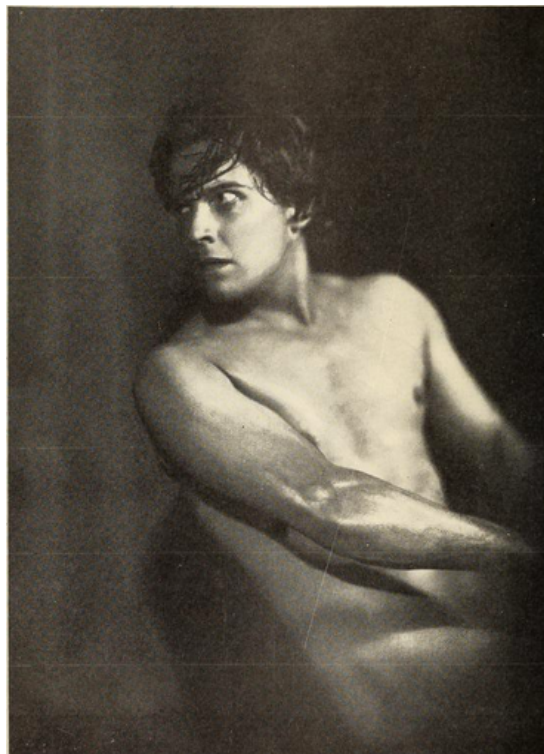


Fig. 4.15: Photograph of Ramon Novarro accompanying updates on films currently shooting (4 February 1925. *Exhibitor's Trade Review*, 12. MHP)

Consumption

One particular resource demonstrates key ways in which the studio encouraged audiences as consumers to engage with the film *at the cinema*: the programme. In the United States, one standard programme was produced by MGM and sold at all cinemas showing the film.¹⁵⁷ The programme contains twenty pages of text and souvenir photographs, and begins and ends with a discussion of Lew Wallace. The author is first mentioned as the originator of the 'immortal story...eagerly read in every English-speaking community'. In consequent paragraphs a single author is associated with each

¹⁵⁶ See Hansen (1991b: 266) for the direction of the female spectator's uninvited gaze toward the unsuspecting male onscreen, characteristic of films starring Rudolph Valentino.

¹⁵⁷ As stated in the programme, (1926, AMPAS).

phase of the history of *Ben-Hur*'s narrative tradition. Abraham Erlanger is credited with 'maintaining the fine and reverential treatment' of the novel. Next, 'Mr. Marcus Lowe [MGM studio executive] undertook the tremendous enterprise of visualising *Ben-Hur*'. Lastly, 'Mr. Niblo has handled the story of *Ben-Hur* in motion pictures with all the tenderness and delicacy and dramatic power that the subject matter calls for.'¹⁵⁸

The final page of the programme contains a longer feature about Wallace and the impetus of conversion to Christianity that inspired the author to write the novel (a paraphrase of 'How I Came to Write *Ben-Hur*'). The concern for the representation of Wallace's authorial intention, and the consequent attempts of the 'authors' of the subsequent *Ben-Hurs* to align themselves with Wallace's spiritual purpose, is a means of legitimising the film's moral value within a cultural climate characterised by harsh criticism of Hollywood from Christian social reform groups. Also, it is a means of emotionalising the relationship of the author to the work, and of the work to the receivers.

The programme also invites the spectator of *Ben-Hur* (1925) to envision himself/herself as belonging to a 'cult' of receivers, who universally acknowledge the importance of *Ben-Hur* within American culture in domestic, business, educational, entertainment, and religious contexts. The programme describes various communities' active engagement with the story, particularly during the touring of the stageplay, and represents the reception of Wallace's story in popular culture as a significant collective movement:

Clubs and secret societies were named after it, the merchandiser borrowed its name to boom his wares. The hall-mark of the fiery Ben-Hur steeds became known in every community, and was the first electrically lighted design in the sky....In each city the coming of "Ben-Hur" was an event...Newspaper space given to the Wallace drama equalled that devoted to any major issue of the time. Editorials, meetings, lectures, talks from the pulpit, strikingly reflected the public interest. For practically a quarter of a century "Ben-Hur" held prominence wherever presented...¹⁵⁹

The mention of *Ben-Hur* bringing the first electric lights to the skies recalls the illumination of the sky by the Christmas star in the opening of Wallace's novel. The film is thus represented as the latest chapter in the long-established story of *Ben-Hur* as a beacon of collective enjoyment across regions and political and socio-economic backgrounds. This standard programme is a highly significant resource demonstrating a publicly recognised continuity, or tradition of reception of Wallace's novel. Moreover, there is an emphasis on the necessity for active, eager, participatory patterns of reader/audience reception to motivate the emergence of new narrative incarnations of

¹⁵⁸ MGM (1926). 'A Short History of this Mighty Production'. Programme, 1. AMPAS.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 4-5.

Ben-Hur. MGM attempted thus to evoke this widespread recognition, and the affective experiences associated with it, in audiences in the immediate viewing context.

Programmes distributed at the Tivoli cinema in London contain a different strategy of solicitation for ‘active reception’ that carried its own special cultural association for British audiences.¹⁶⁰ A recurring advertisement from early 1927 seems to be placed purposefully in conjunction with the episodes in the film involving Christ’s healing miracles. This notice urged audiences to express the feelings of Christian charity they had no doubt derived from the film by donating to the cure of *real* lepers (Fig. 4.16). With £1 the donor could imitate Christ and extend Christian sympathy and healing to lepers suffering in other parts of the British Empire.



Image not permitted for reproduction by third-party copyright holder

Fig. 4.16: Advertisement (21 February 1927. Programme, *Ben-Hur*. Tivoli Theatre, London. BDCM)

Materials indicating spectators’ sustained engagement with the film following its release tend to exhibit the interests of specific communities, especially fan networks. Fan preoccupations with Ramon Novarro’s star image and its relationship to the film were frequently indulged in magazines. One such article encourages fans to reflect upon the film’s masterful role in enhancing the accessibility of Novarro’s emotional expression onscreen. A feature in *Movie Magazine* from February 1926, entitled ‘Closeups of a Charioteer’, includes six close-up photos of Novarro accompanied by captions, which explain developments in camera technology and cinematography techniques that were employed especially for the recording of *Ben-Hur*’s facial expressions in the midst of the chariot race. An interest in the alignment of the

¹⁶⁰ These Tivoli programmes were not standardised, but contained advertisements and film news sections that changed monthly.

personality of Novarro with that of his onscreen role is strong here.¹⁶¹ One caption suggests that the ‘real’ Novarro emerges in these close-ups, and the facial expressions are not a result of acting: ‘It may be that no histrionic credit is due Ramon for these varied expressions’.¹⁶² The referral to Novarro by his first name contributes to the attempt to encourage the idea that personal affinity with the star is attainable by the devoted fan, and made possible by the camera’s capacity to capture close-ups of emotions expressed on the face.

Fan communities are also invited to explore the tension encapsulated in Novarro’s body as paradoxically the object of a drive for sexual experimentation and a symbol of sustained sexual purity. For instance, an unsourced magazine clipping from a scrapbook of Edith Gaunt, member of the Ramon Novarro Film Club (founded 1927), carries a photograph of Novarro as a galley slave, with a bare torso and dishevelled hair. Instead of commenting on the spectacular naval battle sequence, or mentioning the poignancy of the atmospheric interior shots of the slaves suffering at the oars, the author of the caption writes, ‘Ramon Novarro, in the title-role, achieves the triumph of his career. As a galley slave he is amazing’.¹⁶³

This invitation is coupled with magazines’ encouragement of fans to perceive the women who share the screen with Novarro in *Ben-Hur* as stand-ins, through whom fans’ perceived proximity to Novarro is enhanced. While Dyer mentions that stardom can manifest this form of self-identification,¹⁶⁴ Hansen specifically states that in Rudolph Valentino’s films produced during this period a ‘vamp’-type actress often functions as an embedded spectator, gazing at the sexually objectified male with the shameless (and often unsolicited) desire of the female audience member.¹⁶⁵ The article from the Gaunt scrapbook discussed above hearkens back to Niblo’s placement of the spectator behind the eyes of Iras during her attempted seduction of Ben-Hur (discussed in Section 3). The article invites fans to project themselves into the persona of the star and the onscreen role in Iras’ pursuit of sexual domination of Ben-Hur: ‘As Iras, Carmel Myers...confirms the theory that the wiles of forward femininity are in essence unchanged by the passage of centuries’.¹⁶⁶ This quotation appears in the form of a

¹⁶¹ This is a frequent tendency in the construction of the star image (Dyer, 1998: 89).

¹⁶² ‘Closeups of a Charioteer’ (February 1926). *Movie Magazine* 1(6), 58. MHP.

¹⁶³ Untitled fan magazine clipping. Edith Gaunt Scrapbook 2, BFI. This is most likely a British fan magazine because the article opens with a comment about the number of people who saw the film in London, without mention of any American exhibition venues.

¹⁶⁴ Dyer (1998) 18.

¹⁶⁵ Hansen (1991b) 266.

¹⁶⁶ Fan magazine clipping. Edith Gaunt Scrapbook, BFI.

caption accompanying a photograph of Ben-Hur holding Iras in his arms, while she coyly leans away from him, avoiding a kiss.

Yet Novarro's body in *Ben-Hur* (1925), while the object of female spectators' sexual desire, was also, by means of the strong Christian moral messages in the story, mythologised as an image of sexual purity. that the discourse surrounding *Ben-Hur* encouraged female audiences to consider in fascinating balance. Herbert Howe, a frequent interviewer and alleged love interest of Novarro (who was careful to hide his homosexuality under cover of planning to devote his life to the Catholic Church),¹⁶⁷ once wrote that Novarro was "the handsomest youth of the nation, . . . physically perfect, without a single blemish and in possession of all the graces of youth".¹⁶⁸ An article in the *Picturegoer* Weekly Supplement on Novarro and his role in the 1935 film *The Night is Young*, looks back to *Ben-Hur* as the critical opening of a new and significant dimension of Novarro's star image. The article describes Ramon Novarro onscreen and offscreen as 'two completely opposite personalities...in one human being....Ramon so exactly fitted the public's idea of the saint-like, crusading Ben-Hur, that people forgot the dashing young romantic who had first crossed the screen in *The Prisoner of Zenda*'.¹⁶⁹ Even ten years after the release of *Ben-Hur*, this role continued to serve as one of the moral poles of Novarro's star image.

Female viewers during this period were often invited by films, advertisements, and fan magazines to reflect upon their own physicality, and the extent to which they viewed themselves as emulating a female star. Jackie Stacey conceptualises this relationship between female spectator and female star: 'Female viewers...construct themselves as heroines of their own stories which in turn deal with their own heroines at that time.'¹⁷⁰ Although Stacey explores the function of female star images in the 1950s, there is ample evidence to suggest that the prominent female characters in *Ben-Hur*, and their offscreen star images, operate as models of desire, the desire of female viewers to explore self-identification on a variety of levels: clothing and material surroundings (costumes and mise-en-scène); other characters/stars associated with the female character/star; the female character's/star's actions and speech; and the female character's/star's nonverbal emotional discourse (facial expressions, body language).

¹⁶⁷ For a thorough discussion on the development of Ramon Novarro's public image in Hollywood, see Chávez (2011), who illustrates how Novarro 'relied on two interconnecting themes to present the star to the public: his middle-class Mexican status and his sensual yet pure body' (521).

¹⁶⁸ Reported in Chávez (2011: 535), who cites this statement from Howe, 'What is the Mystery of Ramon Novarro?' (1925. *Motion Picture Classic* 22(2), 76).

¹⁶⁹ 'The Real Jekyll and Hyde of Hollywood'. (1935). *Picturegoer* Weekly Supplement. Edith Gaunt Scrapbook 2, BFI.

¹⁷⁰ Stacey (1994) 68.

With respect to the extra-cinematic consumption of *Ben-Hur* (1925), female spectators were encouraged to identify with either the independent-minded, socially sophisticated, sexually liberated Iras/Carmel Myers, or the family-oriented, sexually inhibited, spiritual, modest Esther/May McAvoy. A Ben-Hur Perfume Advertisement by Jergens, circulated in *Photoplay* from October through December 1926 is emblematic of several of the issues discussed above—the commodification of the male star’s body; the invitation for female viewers to pursue an imagined self-identification with a female star through consumer products; and a perceived emotional affinity with a male star (Fig. 4.17).



Fig. 4.17: Advertisements for Jergens Ben-Hur Perfume, featuring Ramon Novarro and May McAvoy (November 1926, *Photoplay*, 109; October 1926, *Photoplay*, 89. MHP)

The actors appear in photographs in the costume of their onscreen roles, while the stars’ ‘personal’ reviews of the product appear beneath the photographs. In October May McAvoy (Esther) is reported by Jergens to have said, ‘Nothing so enhances the charm and sets off the personality of a girl or woman as the right perfume...A woman should find that dainty and striking fragrance that suits her own taste and pleases her friends. Personally I have found nothing in perfumes more delightful than Ben-Hur’.¹⁷¹ The following comments on the romantic associations with the product are attributed to Novarro: ‘Perfume is not for men, but we must admit its seductive sway when combined with the beauty of women. Women have praise for Ben-Hur Perfume, as it

¹⁷¹ Jergens Ben-Hur Perfume advertisement. (October 1926). *Photoplay*, 89. MHP.

seems to distill the romance which its name so long has typified.¹⁷² These advertisements are clearly marketed toward a female buyer, and Novarro's quotation emphasises the perfume's function as endowing the woman wearing it with a seductive power over men. Novarro's admission of this allows the prospective buyer to envision herself as another Iras (in Niblo's film *Iras* makes use of the intoxicating influence of her perfume in order to seduce Ben-Hur shortly after the two meet in the sheik's tent).

The quotation in the advertisement attributed to May McAvoy on the other hand emphasises the agency of the New Woman, the independent consumer, in the purchase of products to express her individuality and her womanhood in a way that complements her personality and pleases her female peers. The use of 'dainty' to describe the perfume, without a focus on the man's impression of the perfume, invites the female buyer to align herself with the modesty and innocence of Esther. This advertisement thus represents the emergence of specialised communities of reception, fan networks, who are invited to partake in the consumption of a product that allows the consumer/viewer to manifest a sustained, active, and affective engagement with the film on the basis of the desire to imitate the aesthetic sensibilities of her favourite female onscreen role. There is also a tension between individual and collective circumstances of reception—the perfume is advertised as a source of individual expression, marketed to the individual spectator. The collective experience of *viewing* in the cinema is downplayed, and the sustained affective relationship between the individual reader of the fan magazine and the characters from the film is underscored.

Two surviving scrapbooks of playbills, magazine and newspaper clippings, and other paraphernalia reflect attempts of individual audience members (both women) to keep a record of seeing *Ben-Hur* at the cinema and consume post-cinematic discourse about the film and its stars. The scrapbook of Edith Gaunt,¹⁷³ a London-based member of the Ramon Novarro Film Club,¹⁷⁴ features Ramon Novarro exclusively and dates from his first films in 1924 to his numerous appearances as a romantic hero throughout the 1930s. The material related to *Ben-Hur* is only a portion of the vast number of clippings, although publications as late as the 1930s look back to Novarro's role as *Ben-Hur* as constituting an important, and enduring aspect of the star's image.

¹⁷² Jergens Ben-Hur Perfume advertisement. (November 1926). *Photoplay*, 109. MHP.

¹⁷³ Accessed at BFI.

¹⁷⁴ 'List of Active Members of the 'Ramon Novarro Film Club' (undated). Edith Gaunt scrapbook, BFI.

The second scrapbook was compiled by Catherine Morrison from Los Angeles when she was a teenager in the mid-1920s.¹⁷⁵ Only two pages document Morrison's interest in *Ben-Hur*. One is a playbill—not the official programme, but a list of the film's cast—surrounded by cut-out headshots of the principal actors and actresses, and the other is a promotional feature from the *Los Angeles Sunday Times* entitled 'At Last, the Chariot Races'. The advertisement emphasises the sympathy modern audiences can expect to cultivate with ancient Roman viewers, thanks to the realism delivered by the camera, and by set design.¹⁷⁶ It is impossible to claim that Catherine Morrison did in fact respond to the chariot race in the way predicted by the advertisement, and it is also beyond our reach to conclude that she participated in any sustained emotional engagement with *Ben-Hur*. The film appears upon only two pages in her scrapbook, surrounded by documentation of other Hollywood films she saw in Los Angeles in the weeks surrounding her viewing of *Ben-Hur*. Without further testimonies from individual viewers not associated with the Hollywood film industry, it is difficult to understand whether *Ben-Hur* (1925) was much more than just another page in the regular filmgoer's diary, or whether it unleashed yet another wave of receivers previously uninitiated into the filmgoing culture, as the novel had initiated new readers, and the stageplay new theatre-goers.

Criticism

Critical reviews provide the individual impressions of professional journalists, and in some cases cite patterns of audience emotional engagement with the film at a particular screening. Trade publications contain advance critical reviews of the film written specifically for film exhibitors, offering special points of appeal to audiences, as well as instructions for 'Exploitation Angles' and 'Drawing Power'. The industry review for *Ben-Hur* (1925), written by George T. Prady and published in *Motion Picture News* emphasises the potential for audiences' immersive emotional engagement with the spectacular elements ('the crashing melodramatic surge of the great seafight, the galley slaves' tragedy, the furious chariot race...'), and claims that the religious sequences will invoke aesthetic appreciation. The exploitation angle is identified as the success of the

¹⁷⁵ Accessed at AMPAS. The short biography of Catherine Morrison can be found on the library website: <http://catalog.oscars.org/vwebv/holdingsInfo?bibId=70799> (Accessed 1 December 2015).

¹⁷⁶ 'At Last, the Chariot Races' (8 November 1925). *Los Angeles Sunday Times*, 4. Catherine Morrison Scrapbook, folder 2, AMPAS.

novel, without mention of specific aspects of the novel's popular reception (for instance, the widespread, intimate engagement with the Christian elements).¹⁷⁷

Despite the caution among industry professionals over mentioning the potential for audiences' emotional engagement with the religious sequences, many American reviews of the film offered glowing appraisals of the religious elements, claiming that the religious sequences surpassed the spectacular ones in terms of their successful invocations of the audience's sympathies. In a review for the *Los Angeles Times*, Edwin Schallert claims that the heart of the continuity from the novel to the stageplay, and finally to Niblo's film is the 'sincere blooming of its flower of spiritual meaning...'. He goes on to claim that the 'character of [the film's] electrical spirituality' can be expected to remain most prominently in the consciousness of the collective viewership.¹⁷⁸

Agnes Smith, a film critic of contemporary renown,¹⁷⁹ opines in *Motion Picture Magazine* that religious feeling is the keystone of the film's emotional atmosphere, and acknowledges this as a legacy of the essence of Wallace's novel: 'the picture stays close to the spirit of [Wallace's] original. It has a genuine religious fervor...a singleness of aim and a unity of purpose. Unlike the other Biblical spectacles that have come to the screen before it, "Ben Hur" is shy on orgies...all of the Biblical episodes are reverently treated'.¹⁸⁰ While Smith does not mention the specific orgy-laden films from which she distinguishes *Ben-Hur*, this could very well be an implicit acknowledgement of Cecil B. DeMille's controversial aesthetic of placing spectacular and erotic elements within biblical sequences.¹⁸¹

In stark contrast to the frequent attention given to the expressions of reverence among audiences in reviews of the Klaw and Erlanger stageplay, only a small number of reviews of *Ben-Hur* (1925) actually report audience responses to the religious episodes. Interest in the use of various techniques of cinematic artifice (camera work, mise-en-scène, acting, Technicolor) to construct these religious scenarios in order to endow them with the *potential* to engage audiences is comparatively more frequent. The emulation of religious painting in *Ben-Hur* (1925) is widely acknowledged in regional newspaper reviews. An article in the *New York Herald* describes the reproduction of four specific paintings in the film: da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, Tissot's *The Pool of*

¹⁷⁷ Prady, G. (16 January 1926). Pre-release review of *Ben-Hur*. *Motion Picture News*, 301. MHP.

¹⁷⁸ Schallert, E. (1926). *Los Angeles Times*, AMPAS.

¹⁷⁹ Stamp (2012) 195.

¹⁸⁰ Smith, A. (March 1926). "'Ben-Hur" Is Shown at Last'. *Motion Picture Magazine*. *Ben-Hur* Scrapbook 8: 96-7. AMPAS.

¹⁸¹ See Shepherd (2013b) for further discussion of DeMille's reputation for the juxtaposition of licentious imagery and religious sequences in his biblical epics.

Siloam, Munkacey's *Christ Before Pilate*, and Blake's *Star of Bethlehem*. The article emphasises colour as the aspect of *Ben-Hur* that allows the paintings to be all the more accurately represented, and even improved. This idea is echoed in an article for the *Chicago Evening Post*, 'Great Paintings Are Animated in "Ben-Hur"', which praises the 'animated paintings' for their capacity to 'thrill' audiences.¹⁸² In short, cinema not only masters the art of painting, but also one-ups it through the vivification of its subjects, which shocks the audience into an increased intimacy with the figures inhabiting the biblical episodes.

Richard Watts Jr. writing for the *Chicago Tribune*, however, downplays the elaborateness of Niblo's 'animated painting' episodes, and exalts the camera's meditation on the spiritual aura of the individual figure of Mary, whom he references as the 'Madonna': 'Despite the director's sedulous following of religious paintings for his groupings, there was more religious feeling and more spiritual exultation in one scene of the Madonna than in all of the [other] Biblical sections laid end on end.'¹⁸³ He goes on to praise actress Betty Bronson for her unlikely portrayal of Mary (considering the actress' formerly best known role of Peter Pan), whose potential to inspire spiritual reflection and even religious devotion was echoed in other reviews.¹⁸⁴ Mary emerged for many reviewers as the primary point of spiritual access in the film, whereas the hand of Christ is ascribed to the 'taste and reticence' with which the filmmakers handled the sequences featuring Christ, according to the limitations Wallace placed upon the visual representation.

A desire for naturalism in the representation of emotions in individual characters, whether religious or melodramatic, is reflected in several reviews. This may be symptomatic of a contemporary American awareness of Stanislavskian conceptions of the expression of complex psychology and individualised emotional experience in acting, which resulted in new practices in theatre (and may have spilled over into cinema).¹⁸⁵ Critical reviews of the acting and performance styles in *Ben-Hur* (1925) demonstrate a certain amount of ambivalence regarding the extent to which the acting is, or should be, drawing upon former models of melodramatic character types to invoke a cinematic/theatrical past to correspond with the 'otherness' of the historical past

¹⁸² 'Great Paintings Are Animated in "Ben-Hur"' (March 1926). *Chicago Evening Post*. *Ben-Hur* Scrapbook, NYPL.

¹⁸³ Watts, R. (10 January 1926). '...Reflections about "Ben-Hur"'. *Chicago Tribune*. *Ben-Hur* Scrapbook, NYPL.

¹⁸⁴ 'Great Paintings Are Animated in "Ben-Hur"' (March 1926). *Chicago Evening Post*, NYPL.

¹⁸⁵ Gledhill (1991: 219-21) explains that the idea of the pre-existing melodramatic character type on the stage had begun to diminish with the rise of the New Drama movement at the end of the nineteenth century, continuing into the twentieth century.

depicted onscreen, or to employ more subtle, individual psychological profiles of the characters from Wallace's story. Indeed, one of the most frequent complaints among the film's reviewers concerned Carmel Myers' 'vamping' as Iras. Multiple reviews, which survive as (regrettably unsourced) newspaper clippings,¹⁸⁶ claim that Iras, whose individual character was so specifically drawn in Wallace's novel, appeared in the film in the disappointing cinematic stereotype of the 'old-fashioned and entirely too eager movie vamp'.¹⁸⁷ Another review claims that Myers' 'old-fashioned movie vamp, modernized by a bobbed wig' deprives Wallace's 'dusky and glamorous Egyptian' of her mystique and psychological complexity.¹⁸⁸

Francis X. Bushman's performance as Messala was also frequently dismissed as antiquated and belonging to a former performance style: 'Francis X. Bushman...appears from the past to remind us that the motion picture has made great progress.'¹⁸⁹ According to reviewers, then, Niblo's strategic use of acting styles characteristic of a former performance era do not function to place his melodramatic villains in the historical past, but instead distract the viewer from the emotionally immersive aspects of the story and invite criticisms of the cinematic artifice employed to illustrate the narrative.

Richard Watts' review (discussed above) describes the invitation for audiences' interest in the story of individual characters as less than adequate in comparison with contemporary dramas that are more sophisticated in their character portrayals:

In these pictures, where all the emphasis is placed on numbers and mass effect, there is bound to be a lessening of interest in the individual... the people in "Ben-Hur" become stock romantic figures, with little illusion of life about them....[T]he Niblo picture is less moving, and in the end, less satisfying, than some of its less ostentatious brethren among the MGM output, "The Tower of Lies" for one...'.¹⁹⁰

Watts' criticism that *Ben-Hur* lacks attention to the individual character, thereby emotionally alienating the audience, denies the film one of the key functions of its genre. Robert Rosenstone identifies as the distinctive component of the historical film the 'micro-history', an emotionalised form of history-writing that pays attention to the individual as a person affected by the ideological, political, social, and cultural trends characteristic of a particular historical setting.¹⁹¹ The comparison to *Tower of Lies* is

¹⁸⁶ *Ben-Hur* Scrapbook 8: 98-9, 109. AMPAS.

¹⁸⁷ Untitled review of *Ben-Hur*. 1926. Scrapbook 8: 98-9. AMPAS.

¹⁸⁸ Untitled review of *Ben-Hur*. 1926. Scrapbook 8: 109. AMPAS.

¹⁸⁹ Quotation from Harriet Underhill's review in the *Herald Tribune*, reproduced in "'Ben-Hur" on the Screen' (6 February, 1926). *Literary Digest*, 29. MHP. See Dyer (1998: 142-3) for discussion of the star's performance style and its interaction with his or her star image.

¹⁹⁰ Watts, R. (10 January 1926). *Chicago Tribune*, NYPL.

¹⁹¹ Rosenstone (2012) 53-4.

worth noting, because this film, now lost, was also based on a historical novel, and also debuted in fall 1925.¹⁹² Although in his review of *Ben-Hur* Watts suggests that *Tower of Lies* was better at representing human emotions and inciting emotional responses from audiences, other contemporary reviews criticised this film's alleged sacrifice of potential drama and human psychology for the exploration of artistic innovation.¹⁹³ Critical interest in big-budget, action-packed, films showcasing cinematic technology seems to have been deteriorating in this period, in favour of a more technologically simplistic, but more emotionally complex model of narrative cinema (through a greater reliance on the nuances of screenwriting and acting), at least in the genre of historical fiction films.

Even the prime spectacular sequence of the chariot race, while widely praised for its ability to generate 'authentic excitement' in audiences 'through a shrewd and knowing use of the camera',¹⁹⁴ was criticised for its lack of realism and abundance of cinematic artifice. One review, entitled "'Ben Hur" Is So Real It Hurts to Know It's Make Believe', suggests a potential element of disappointment for audiences as a result of the hyperrealism of the frequently shifting camera shots in the chariot race sequence. According to this reviewer, the effects of this type of camerawork draw an undue amount of attention to the authorial role of the camera, and thus remind audiences to their dismay that they are witnesses to the magic of cinema creating a chariot-race-viewing experience unavailable to anyone in real life. Interestingly, this reviewer also laments the film's removal of the viewer's sympathy with the viewers of chariot races in the ancient context: '[W]ere it not for this annoying adult knowledge of how it is all done, [it] would be as real to the beholder as were actual events to actual beholders centuries ago.'¹⁹⁵

Many of the American reviews cited above share a common concern for the extent to which the atmosphere, the essence, and/or the spirit of the film interact with Wallace's novel as the narrative archetype. Even *Photoplay* reviewer Agnes Smith, who admits that she has neither read the novel nor seen the stageplay, includes in her review her estimation that the film exceeds both previous narrative incarnations of *Ben-Hur*. There is some debate among critics as to the film's ability to remain in touch with Wallace's novel. According to the reviewer for *Life* magazine, the spectacular features of the film compromise Wallace's initial, religiously-motivated vision for the narrative:

¹⁹² Carey (1970) 46.

¹⁹³ Florin (2012) 105-6.

¹⁹⁴ Watts, R. (10 January 1926). *Chicago Tribune*, NYPL.

¹⁹⁵ "'Ben Hur" Is So Real It Hurts to Know It's Make Believe' (17 April 1926). *Daily News*. *Ben-Hur* Scrapbook, NYPL.

‘...[the] orgy of huge sets, seething mobs and camera effects contains little of the spirit of the original story.’¹⁹⁶ On the other hand, the reviewer for the *Boston Daily Globe* acknowledges that, although Niblo did add pictorial elements departing from the human interest of Wallace, these changes allow for a reconciliation of varied points of exposure to *Ben-Hur* across media and generations, and invite a collective interest of older and younger viewers in a narrative that changes alongside cultural, artistic, and technological changes in the receiving community.¹⁹⁷

How did critics representing the receiving community arguably most concerned with the film’s adherence to Wallace, the Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur, find *Ben-Hur* (1925)? The attention given to the film in *The Chariot*, although favourable, is surprisingly subdued. Marion Snyder’s review entitled ‘The Film “Ben-Hur”: Long Talked of—Long Delayed—At Last Here’ appears on the fifth page of the March 1926 issue, almost three months after the film’s debut at the George M. Cohan Theatre in New York. Although the front-page priority formerly given to the promotional feature in May 1925 is lacking here,¹⁹⁸ the tone of Snyder’s review is one of enthusiastic praise. She appears to have approached the screening at the Cohan (she does not mention whether or not she was there for the debut) with an apprehension similar to that expressed by John. C. Wingate in advance of viewing the Klaw and Erlanger stageplay.¹⁹⁹ What Snyder claims quelled the anxiety that she would ‘be disappointed in “Ben-Hur”’ was the creation of a vivid emotional atmosphere at the appearance of the first title:

A rush of triumphant, majestic music from the orchestra, the parting of the curtains, the glowing silver screen, and...on a luminous blue background flashed the first words: “Ben-Hur—A Tale of the Christ”...those first few simple words gave me sudden assurance...just that simple phrase that all my life had described “Ben-Hur”.²⁰⁰

While this quotation may suggest Snyder’s particular affinity for the religious episodes, she does not in fact describe an experience of reverence or devotion derived from viewing the Christian material. She distinguishes what she finds to be the visually impressive quality of the Christmas star in the beginning of the film, yet she does not reflect at length on this. Neither does she appear to be significantly interested in the chariot race, on which she remarks simply, ‘one could not honestly begrudge it its success’.

¹⁹⁶ ‘The Silent Drama’. (21 January 1926). *Life*, 24. APD.

¹⁹⁷ ‘“Ben-Hur” Pictured at the Colonial’ (Feb 23, 1926). *Boston Daily Globe*, NYPL.

¹⁹⁸ See ‘promotion’ in this section for the 1925 article in *The Chariot*.

¹⁹⁹ Wingate (1899) reproduced in Morsberger and Morsberger (1980: 462). See discussion in Chapter 3, Section 3.

²⁰⁰ Snyder, M. (March 1926). ‘The Film “Ben-Hur”: Long Talked of—Long Delayed—At Last Here’. *The Chariot*, 5. CDPL.

She begins her review with an indication of her chief concern in the valuation of the film: 'There are a thousand Ben-Hurs, existing in varying fashions in the minds of the thousands to whom the name conjures up the image of an actual man.' At the conclusion of the review, Snyder assures her readers (seemingly other Daughters of Hur) that the realisation of the man Ben-Hur is on point: 'Ramon Novarro is, so far as I am concerned, the very incarnation of Ben-Hur. I find him perfect'. Presumably for Snyder, Ben-Hur is first and foremost an onscreen role awaiting a star association.

This review contains no interpretation regarding Christian significance, moral lessons, or the relationship to Wallace normally found in publications from the Tribe. In fact, Snyder does not mention Wallace at all. By all accounts, through her references to her continued attention to publicity about the film's production, she identifies herself more strongly as a member of the body of female habitual filmgoers, who engage regularly in extra-cinematic discourse about films and film stars, than as a Daughter of Hur. She does perhaps implicitly hint at her affiliation with the Tribe ('the book Ben-Hur has been greatly "personalized," particularly among those to whom it means a special something'), yet her account of the viewing experience is defined by an appraisal of the film's secular entertainment value. Such a valuation seems rather uncharacteristic for a Tribe member, given the Tribe's historical relationship to the narrative tradition of *Ben-Hur*, a relationship characterised in large part by a particular interpretation of Christian spirituality in alignment with Wallace's depiction. The presence of this review indicates that, from the perspective of the Tribe, a text of *Ben-Hur* produced without Wallace's direct influence could not aspire to the quasi-sacred status of the novel (and to some extent the stageplay).

Reframing

Patterns in the production, promotion, and popular consumption of the 1931 re-release of *Ben-Hur* reveal the significant impact of changes in cinema technologies, and popular conceptions of the cultural function of cinema, on the film's reception among American audiences. MGM synchronised *Ben-Hur* to music and re-released it in 1931 in order to make up the loss the studio had sustained after the initial run of the film five years earlier.²⁰¹ By this time the studio had to contend with increased pressure from

²⁰¹ Eyman (2005) 109.

Christian censorship advocacy groups,²⁰² and was consequently mandated by state censorship boards to cut certain scenes for regional or Sunday showings.²⁰³

In 1930 the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), faced with the potential of federal censorship, composed a list of guidelines for morality in films,²⁰⁴ with the determination that all films must ‘leave a certain final moral lesson’, and, if they include scenes of violence, sexuality, or lascivious activity, they should ensure that these scenes are only present in order to ‘...give the audience the opportunity to contrast good and evil’.²⁰⁵ These guidelines were published on the front page of the industry magazine *Variety* on 16 February 1930, and were known as the ‘Hays’ Film Regulations’,²⁰⁶ named after a Presbyterian elder who, on behalf of the Federal Council of Churches (made up of Catholics and Protestants), sought to supervise the morality of the film industry.²⁰⁷ The word ‘sympathy’ appears in two of the three general principles of the Hays’ Code, and appears a total of twelve times throughout the code. The MPPDA’s concern for audiences’ sympathetic engagement with film texts recalls film theorist Murray Smith’s idea of the ‘allegiance’ pattern of emotional engagement that implies a moral sympathy;²⁰⁸ the use of sympathy in the Hays’ Code represents the specific concern among censorship advocacy groups about the potentially dangerous social consequences of audiences’ emotional engagement and self-identification with allegedly immoral characters and activities in Hollywood films.

Although both Irving Thalberg, the original director of production for the 1925 film, and Lew Wallace Jr., grandson of Lew Wallace, were involved in the process of generating the guidelines of the Hays’ Code,²⁰⁹ *Ben-Hur* (1931) nevertheless was censored in various states for scenes of violence and nudity. Despite the filmmakers’ original anxieties about the corporeal representation of Christ, none of the religious sequences required alteration.

²⁰² See Parker (2006) for examples of the pressure placed upon the studios by such advocacy groups.

²⁰³ Lindvall (2009: 26-27) attributes this suspicion to the increase of more psychologically complex characters and sexual imagery, as well as a growing focus in Hollywood films on religious hypocrisy. Maltby (1986: 38) adds that the ‘alleged permissiveness of the Jazz Age’ was blamed economic collapse in 1929.

²⁰⁴ Vieira (2010) 73.

²⁰⁵ Maltby (1986) 259.

²⁰⁶ ‘Hays’ Film Regulations’. (19 February 1930). *Variety*, 98(6), 9. MHP.

²⁰⁷ Lindvall (2009) 27. For further information on Protestant and Catholic lobbies’ influence on censorship practices in the 1930s, see Quicke (2009, 32-7).

²⁰⁸ Smith (1995) 75.

²⁰⁹ Vieira (2010) 73. Morey (2003: 125) mentions that the Hays Office placed Lew Wallace Jr. in charge of the ‘development of pedagogical and religious pictures’ on behalf of the MPPDA.

The following excerpts from censorship reports for *Ben-Hur* with synchronised sound provide some examples of specified restrictions to the original content imposed in certain places within the United States:

Virginia (dated 10 December 1931): 'Approved without eliminations'.

Kansas (dated 10 December 1931): 'Approved without eliminations'.

Ohio (dated 9 January 1932): 'Approved without eliminations'.

Massachusetts (dated 29 December 1931): Carries 'deletions' including torture of Simonides, naked slave chained to wall in galley scene, snakes being put into the bottle (in naval battle scenes), man stabbed with spear in fight with pirates, and 'snakes on deck'. The report also mandates, 'eliminate scene of man impaled on spear and being carried around', 'eliminate all C.U. scenes of men being stabbed.' These deletions are 'required only for Sunday morning'.²¹⁰

The majority of scenes for deletion involve violence towards people or animals.

Notably, these deletions do not include the arguably graphic scenes of Christ on the Via Dolorosa, and the appearance of his bloody hand as Christ is crucified. The restriction of scenes characterised by excessive violence for Sunday showings in Massachusetts represents censorship boards' insistence that films shown on Sundays maintain a close connection to their 'central moral lesson', an opinion that the film-going public did not necessarily share. *Ben-Hur*'s subjection to censorship in 1931 represents a noteworthy change from the industry's attitude toward the film as a model for morality in the cinema, predicted in *Variety* in 1926: '*Ben-Hur* will be the ever-present censor for all pictures for many years to come, because no one who sees *Ben-Hur* will ever be able to reconcile himself to any unclean picture or have any wish to patronize any unclean picture maker or any exhibitor who will display an unclean picture upon his screen'.²¹¹

Although the spectacle sequences were in some regions deprived of their most violent sections due to censorship, the studio advertised the return of *Ben-Hur* as 'bigger than ever' with sound. An American pressbook for the 1931 re-release attempts to justify smaller exhibitors' showing the film with the synchronised music, claiming that exhibition venues in rural communities during the first touring of the film did not have the facilities to offer full orchestral accompaniment, and this was thus the chance for people to hear *Ben-Hur* properly for the first time. The pressbook also encourages exhibitors to market the film to 'churches, schools, and libraries', emphasising the educational and moral values of the film. Picture advertisements exhort prospective viewers to 'think of these thrills in sound!—The Chariot Race—The Seafight—The

²¹⁰ Censorship reports for release of synchronized version of 1925 film, approved by Colonel Jason S. Joy, head of Studio Relations Committee, which operated as a mediating body between the state censorship boards and the studios, whom it would advise regarding probable deletions to films (Vieira, 2010: 73). (Accessed at Motion Picture Association of America, Production Code Administration Records, AMPAS).

²¹¹ '*Ben-Hur* and Censoring' (6 January 1926). *Variety*, 81 (8), 18. MHP.

Wreck—The Romance’. The claim for a greater sense of realism and immersion into the action onscreen, particularly during the spectacular sequences, was frequently anticipated as an effect of the synchronised score and added sound effects. One advertisement anticipates that ‘insertion of sound gives the spectacular scenes even greater power and vividness. The shouts of the multitudes, the noise of the racing chariots, clash of arms in the battle scenes and other sound effects add a breathtaking naturalness’.²¹²

Given that their reported emotional investment in spectacle was dwindling already in the mid-1920s due to a heightened interest in more in-depth character drawing, viewers in 1931 retained an even lower degree of enthusiasm for films whose central point of appeal was spectacle. An article in *Motion Picture Herald* described studios’ lessening production of spectacular films, allegedly as a result of viewers’ decreased attendance at these films: ‘The day of the spectacular picture—referring to such vehicles as “Quo Vadis,” “Ben-Hur,” “Intolerance,” “Birth of a Nation,” ... apparently is fading.’²¹³ As Miriam Hansen observes, the coming of synchronised sound also diminished the ‘liveness’ of the film, by removing the element of the musician or the orchestra accompanying the onscreen images.²¹⁴ This may have had the effect of decreasing the audience’s perception of the immediacy of the spectacular material.

With the combination of the above shifts in the tenor of audience engagement with spectacle films, and the beginning of the Great Depression in the United States, the synchronised sound version of the film was not very successful, both economically and in terms of critical/audience enthusiasm, although it did make up for the loss sustained by the studio after the 1925 release. According to box office figures reported in the Mannix register of MGM grosses, the re-release earned 11% of the gross earned by the original release.²¹⁵ The greatest arena of unfavourable discourse occurred in response to the acting, which to 1931 audiences (including professional critics) seemed antiquated and emotionally alienating. The winner of a \$20 prize for best letter to the editor of fan magazine *Movie Classics* represented the dissatisfaction of a disgruntled fan, Jean McMichael of Toronto, Canada, who is quoted to have written that the re-release of the film, although heralded by ‘advance publicity promis[ing] sound entertainment, coaxing the unsuspecting screenward’, actually spoiled the public’s memories of the ‘now-faded

²¹² Pressbook for 1931 re-release, BFI.

²¹³ ‘Good Program Pictures Satisfying Public’. (18 April 1931). *Motion Picture Herald*, 69. MHP.

²¹⁴ Hansen, reported in Staiger (2000: 18).

²¹⁵ Glancy (1992) 129.

glory' of the production, with the exposure of performance styles and cinematography considered 'antediluvian' to the 1931 viewer.²¹⁶ This viewer's opinion, given such prominence in a fan magazine, seems to be resonant with a kind of reticent public disillusionment with *Ben-Hur*, a despondency that Wallace's narrative was, for once, irrelevant to the lives of receivers.

4.5. CONCLUSION

Through a combination of overtly character-oriented and subtle, 'synaesthetic' techniques, MGM's *Ben-Hur* (1925) created a vision of Wallace's Judaea that consistently renegotiates its melodramatic, atmospheric, spectacular, and reverential properties. Painting, literature (including the Bible), and theatre were placed in animated conversation on the screen. The film provided commentary on issues of gender, religion, immigration, and the relationship between morality and consumption, commentary that many spectators were looking to Hollywood to provide. Yet, upon the film's re-release, *Ben-Hur* (1931) was subjected to censorship and harsh criticism from audiences who had previously heralded the film's technological innovation, artistic sensibilities, and adherence to a strong sense of Christian morality. Unlike the ongoing public enthusiasm experienced by Wallace's novel, the generic (reportedly divinely inspired) hybrid of historical fiction and biblical fiction, MGM's *Ben-Hur* came to be seen as derivative (both as an adaptation of a novel/play and in its emulation of other biblical epic films) and aesthetically obsolete. Nevertheless, this chapter has demonstrated various methods of interaction between the filmmakers, the film text, and the audience (whether actual or solicited) in order to further the cultural significance of Wallace's narrative through the medium of narrative feature film. The studio clearly aimed to replicate the extraordinary relationship Wallace's readers had with *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* by encouraging its audiences to envision themselves as members of the significant cultural movement that was traditionally the public response to preceding narratives of *Ben-Hur*.

Two interesting paradoxes can be observed with respect to the film's production and reception, and the relationship between these two processes discussed in this chapter. Firstly, concerns for the audience's ability and desire to make meaning from the film text and the discourse and merchandise it inspires is ever-present in the minds

²¹⁶ McMichael, J. (April 1932). 'Don't Spoil the Beautiful Memories' (Letter to editor). *Movie Classics*, 8. MHP.

of the studio executives, filmmakers, promoters, and fan magazine authors, yet the 'historical audience' is still not precisely identifiable. The limited evidence demonstrating individual audience members' engagement with the film does not indicate that *Ben-Hur* (1925) stood out significantly from other films as far as habitual filmgoers were concerned, let alone created specific communities of engagement. Instead, it perpetuated spectators' interest and participation in pre-existing interpretative communities (especially fan networks). The second paradox has to do with the religious material in the film. While the production files suggest that a chief concern for the filmmakers was the inoffensive, yet realistic representation of Christ onscreen, the reviews of the film tend to overlook Christ's role, and provide neither strong praise nor vehement criticism. Even the review from the Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur does not offer sustained commentary on the rendering of Christ onscreen (let alone other religious episodes). Instead, reviews tend to praise the religious *atmosphere* for its ability to inspire reverence in audiences, and Mary is recognised for drawing Christian meditation, and even religious devotion.

From the audience's perspective, it appears that, for the most part, sustained engagement with the film manifested in the discourse of fans surrounding the film's stars. If the critics are reliable, audiences in the cinema found the scenes of spectacle and the religious sequences the most immersive. The character development did not appear to foster a sympathetic engagement (especially in 1931) to the extent that readers of Wallace's novel and audiences of the Klaw and Erlanger stageplay had related to Ben-Hur and Esther, been repulsed by Messala, and been transfixed by Iras. Although by this point in the history of its narrative tradition *Ben-Hur* had reached the height of its secular appeal, the Christian dimension that had made the novel a significant cultural artefact continued to contribute strongly to the aesthetic appreciation, if not the profound sense of reverence, reported in reviews. The story of the American cultural reception of *Ben-Hur* (1925) is a complicated one, yet clearly the interplay between text, audience, and reception context is in perpetual operation as far as the invitations for emotional engagement onscreen are accepted, endangered, or ignored by the shifting socio-cultural circumstances of the film's appearance and circulation.

CONCLUSION

Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ (1880) as a novel about ancient Judaea during the life of Christ was in many ways written especially *for* the United States during a time when the ambition for cultural unity was partially tied to the reconciliation of conflicting American self-identifications with Rome. Author Lew Wallace traced the crux of American cultural identity to Christ's life story, and the origin of Christian (particularly an evangelical Protestant) salvation, implicitly offering this as a way toward American social, economic, and political progress and rehabilitation following civil conflict. This thesis has drawn attention to the considerable influence of concerns related to emotional engagement that contributed to the development of an unprecedented cultural phenomenon in the United States, namely the widespread and consequential integration of *Ben-Hur* (1880), and performance adaptations directly inspired by it, into American religious practice, public education, popular entertainment, material consumption, and even domestic life.

As demonstrated in Chapter 1, throughout the novel Wallace posits a synthesis of ideological orientation, emotional experience, and religious faith, which determines the morality of a society, whether ancient or modern. The central function of this emotionological structuring in *Ben-Hur* (1880) was to invite readers to reflect upon their own place within such communities of emotional, social, and religious experience. Wallace provides varied levels of psychological access for the reader to fictionalised emotionologies of Romans, Jews, and proto-Christians, sometimes compromising the historical setting in order to frame these emotionologies within a nineteenth-century perspective. The novel then distances readers from a model of emotional, ideological, and religious behaviour Wallace associates with social toxicity and decline, and points them, through the example of Judah Ben-Hur, toward a model that exalts (Christian) cooperation, compassion, and charity—a model also associated with upward social mobility and material prosperity. In *Ben-Hur* there thus emerges a causal relationship between an individual's shift in emotional behaviour and moral attitude, and constructive historical change (Ben-Hur's financial contribution to the growth of Christianity in Rome).

The success of *Ben-Hur* (1880) in the United States was indeed related to the novel's unique combination of plot elements of love story and adventure, the appeal of

Orientalist aesthetics, the thrilling chariot race, and the overall call to a reflection on Christian origins through a supposed reverential treatment of Christ's life and death. Yet the archival materials consulted in Chapter 2 reveal a vital key to the novel's long-lasting influence, and the generation of textual adaptations for subsequent generations of audiences, namely the (initially unsolicited) emergence of emotional communities characterised by a shared interpretation of the novel, and a shared concept of its active influence on the lives of the members of these communities. The desire among audiences to re-experience Wallace's narrative allowed *Ben-Hur* to pervade various forms of aural and visual media—staged readings, painting, *tableaux vivants*, melodrama, early silent cinema, and silent narrative feature cinema. The libretto Wallace developed for the staging of *Ben-Hur* in *tableaux* and pantomime further encouraged particularly Christian communities' active reception of his narrative (Chapter 3, Section 2).

The authors of these subsequent narrative incarnations still paid homage to Wallace as the father of a literary masterpiece with a clear moral agenda that was *Ben-Hur*; yet they also took it upon themselves to invite their respective audiences to interpret the narrative according to the conventions of the medium through which it was adapted. Chapter 3 investigated Klaw and Erlanger's methods of animating Wallace's descriptions of vivid aesthetic atmospheres, such as the Grove of Daphne, and of rendering the spiritual immediacy of Christ's presence, using the vacillating verbal and non-verbal modes of expression of melodrama. Audiences' enduring enthusiasm for the live chariot race and participation in the Christian revival surrounding the healing of the lepers allowed this particular adaptation to circulate for over two decades, and to encourage consumption of special editions of Wallace's novel written for audience groups with particular interest in the religious and spectacular episodes (Chapter 3, Section 3). Kalem Studios urged audiences of the film *Ben-Hur* (1907) at the nickelodeon to share in the thrill exhibited by the crowd of spectators onscreen in response to the chariot race, and to appreciate the integration of outdoor staging techniques reminiscent of pyrodrama without preoccupation with the sombre Christian narrative (Chapter 3, Section 5).

Chapter 4 drew attention to the role *anticipated* emotional responses from audiences had to play in the process of generating the cinematic adaptation, *Ben-Hur* (1925). MGM played to the contemporary popularity of the cinema with female audiences, and invited spectators to project themselves into Iras' mind and enjoy the view of Ramon Novarro as Judah Ben-Hur. Through the use of close-ups in religious

sequences, the filmmakers were able to bring the level of audiences' reported emotional engagement with the character of Mary well beyond that demonstrated in reviews or personal testimonies associated with the previous narrative incarnations of *Ben-Hur* (including the novel). Yet, although MGM attempted to claim a reverential adherence to the moral mission of Wallace, there is no evidence to suggest that the studio could replicate the extraordinary, individualised relationship Wallace's readers had experienced with *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* and its author.

The widespread, perpetual circulation of the texts of *Ben-Hur* featured in this thesis can be traced to a relationship between three major factors:

1. The relevance of their specific interpretation of the interaction of cultures in first-century Judaea to the political, social, economic, and religious issues characterising the immediate audiences' historical circumstances.
2. The adaptations' clear placement of themselves within the previously acknowledged tradition of *Ben-Hur* as a 'classic' that had achieved literary immortality.
3. Movements of receiving communities toward the construction of new interpretations, reception contexts, or derivative productions inspired by the text.

Ideas of emotional engagement and subjective interpretation are at play to a large extent within all three of the above phenomena. What makes *Ben-Hur* stand out from other historical fiction narratives is its unique tradition of garnering the enthusiasm of audiences and readers in pursuit of 'active' receptions associated with the third category.

This project has thus demonstrated a high degree of interdependency between author, text, audience, and reception context, and the crucial role of emotions in the production and interpretation of the text within this interdependent relationship. The remarkable number of individual testimonies and published discourse point to the workings of emotion as a key strategy through which *Ben-Hur* in its various forms was able to invite this type (and an extraordinary volume) of discourse from its immediate audience and thereby gain the status of one of the most important texts of classical reception in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The implications of this thesis for scholarship in classical reception studies fall into two major categories of concern: studies of historical fiction, and methodological pursuit of the ‘democratic turn’.¹ Historical fiction plays a vital role in the reception of the ancient world in popular culture. Scholars have observed the tendency for this genre to cross media and ‘emotionalise’ history, by featuring a relatable protagonist with personal concerns (family, love, livelihood) affected by historical circumstances whose dynamics of politics, religion, economy, and society resonate with those at stake for the culture within which the historical fiction narrative is generated. The consequences of this ‘necessary anachronism’² are numerous. The individual reader can be inspired to see himself or herself as an agent of historical change.³ The spectator can marvel at the ways in which history can be vivified and thus *experienced* as well as learned in a formal setting.⁴ The receiver can explore the reinforcement, the challenge, and/or the transformation of pre-existing interpretations of a particular historical time and place through the quality of fiction’s particular ‘historiographic conventions’.⁵

This thesis has attempted to investigate what scholarship has accepted as a discernible, yet nebulous, aspect of receiving the ancient world through historical fiction, namely emotional engagement and subjective interpretation. By exploring the complexity of ways in which this emotionalisation of one specific historical fiction narrative is played out and encountered from the perspective of author, text, and receiver throughout media and reception contexts, this project has elucidated the protean nature of historical fiction. Even a story such as *Ben-Hur*, famous for its fundamental components of revenge plot, chariot race, love story, and Christian conversion undergoes significant narrative and stylistic transformations with each adaptation, as the truly interdependent relationship between author, text, audience, and reception context is renegotiated with respect to anticipated and actual points of emotional engagement. Within the mutability of historical fiction lies its power, its continued relevance.

The example of *Ben-Hur* has shown the extent to which this engagement can manifest itself collectively. Beginning with Wallace’s novel, the narrative tradition of *Ben-Hur* stimulated the growth of communities of shared interpretation, such as the Supreme Tribe of Ben-Hur and dedicated reading groups, which carried common testimonies of emotional response to the story at their core. Pre-existing collectives with

¹ See Introduction for initial discussion of this term, the subject of Hardwick and Harrison (eds.)(2013).

² For ‘necessary anachronism’, derived from Lukács, see Chapter 1, Section 2.

³ Lukács (1962) 24.

⁴ Rosenstone (2012) 53-4.

⁵ Wyke (1997) 32.

a strong foundation in mainstream culture (church congregations, fan networks) employed emotional responses to *Ben-Hur* in order to further their initiatives.

This project carries a related methodological contribution to the ‘democratic turn’, or, more precisely, the greater focus on audience experiences within classical reception studies. There is much to be gained when audience data and reported responses to the product of classical reception are considered in relationship to the text and its recognised mode of operation within the immediate reception context (this relationship will be somewhat unique to every product of classical reception). This holistic analysis, compounded with the focus on emotions as a primary mode of the audience experience, provides an opportunity to understand the audience’s high degree of influence on the text’s meaning(s) in popular culture, both in the immediate reception context and thereafter. With respect to the focus of this thesis, further cinematic adaptations of *Ben-Hur* (MGM’s 1959 production and the new MGM film anticipated for release in 2016) can be evaluated by the same cohesive method, and judged for the extent to which their negotiation of American self-identification with ancient Rome is determined (by the filmmakers, audiences, and by the text itself) to bear cultural significance for contemporary receivers. How has the text continued to evolve in order to encourage patterns of emotional engagement attuned to the reception context? Will *Ben-Hur* (2016), with its presumed return to the spiritual themes of Wallace’s novel, be able to captivate a new generation of active receivers? On what level is the cultural identification with Rome encouraged in circulating historical fiction narratives today compared to its status in earlier periods (including the period covered in this study)? In order to find out, it is important to maintain an awareness of the significant role of emotions and subjective experience in the reframing, reinterpretation, and renegotiation of the ancient world in popular culture, and I look forward to being a part of the research movement that evaluates these realms of inquiry.

APPENDIX

1.

Transcription of an excerpt from a letter to Lew Wallace from reader Nicholas Smith.

22 March 1886. Janesville, WI. Wallace mss. II (1865-1884):

....I laid [your book] down with the strangest feeling I ever experienced in my life. The touching scene of the Carpenter's son giving Ben-Hur a drink of water, the searching for the mother and Tirzah at Jerusalem, the healing of their leprosy by Christ, and the matchless story of the crucifixion made a wonderful impression on me. Then came a terrible [sic] which lasted many weeks. I could scarcely work, eat, or sleep. The affecting scenes described in the closing part of the book abiding with me night and day. It was a struggle deeper and more intense than you can possibly imagine, and I did not find relief till the last Sunday in February when I united with the First Congregational Church of this city. This ended the struggle with conscience, and since that time I have been blest with a new home, a new life, and a perfect peace of mind....

It is possible that this letter was written by the same Nicholas Smith who in 1889 was a Member of the Wisconsin State Board of Supervision of Charitable, Reformatory, and Penal Institutions, under whose charge was the School for the Blind, located in Janesville.¹ Smith's letter is dated ten days after the letter Wallace received from Elizabeth Little,² who identifies herself as a teacher at the School for the Blind in Janesville. Since Nicholas Smith's letter does not cite an association with this institution, this may not be the same individual as the one listed as overseeing the School of the Blind. If this reader was the same Nicholas Smith, this letter, considered in conversation with that of Elizabeth Little, may reveal the existence of a local reading group in Janesville, Wisconsin, or at least a sharing of the Christian missionary and devotional value of *Ben-Hur* (1880) in the community of Janesville.

2.

Transcription of an excerpt from a letter to Lew Wallace from reader Geo R. Parrish,

Secretary, YMCA. 1 January 1887. Kewanee, IL. Wallace mss. II (1865-1884):

...To one who saves our lives men cannot fail but be grateful...On the 5th day of July, 1865, I was a drunkard, given up by everyone as bound to come to a bad end. I had no future to hope for, no past but of which I was ashamed. Everything was black and growing blacker, while I was reckless enough not to ever care. Yet, God knows, that

¹ This is according to a the Wisconsin Blue Book (Timme, 1889: 399), a reference book for schools, families, and public life, which included various points of information about the State, including the State constitution, records of census, population, property, and voting information, and information about State institutions. Accessed via University of Wisconsin, Madison Digital Collections.

<http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/WI.WIBlueBk1887>. Accessed 4 December.

² See Chapter 2, Section 4.

deep in my heart I had attempted so many times to rise above temptation and had failed. I knew that a mother as well as the girl that loved me through it all, were praying for me....I rested upon my own strength and made a most miserable failure. That Sunday morning your book "Ben Hur" came into my hands and...it seemed to bring Christ home to me as nothing else could—he became mine, and before the week ended, resting on his strength, I stood up again in this community, and was a man. That was over a year ago and I have not lost confidence or faltered. With God's help I am going on to achieve what I can in His service....

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